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JUNE, '41

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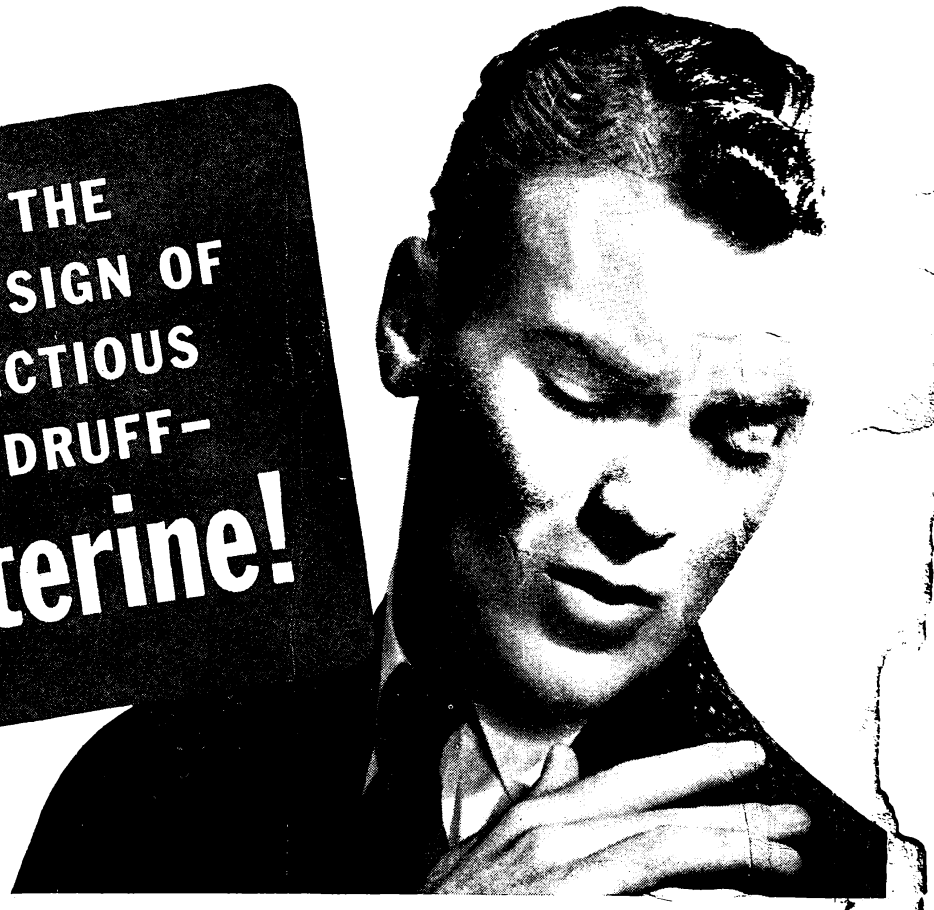

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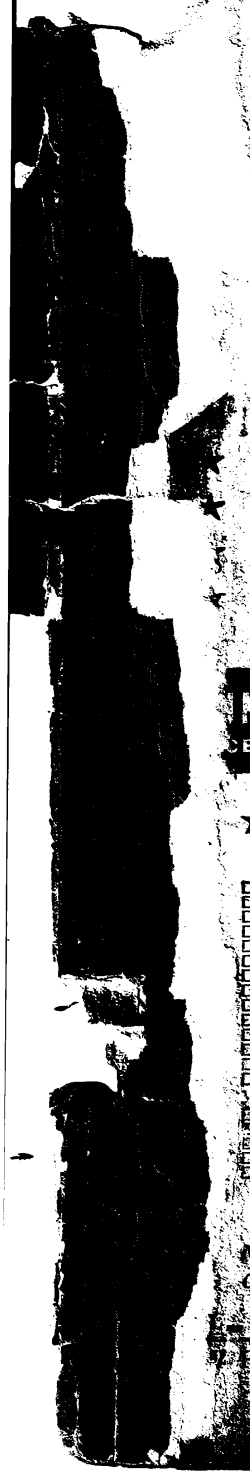

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The WHISPERER

CONTENTS JUNE, 1941 VOL. I NO. 5

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COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

THE SECRET MENACE . . . . . Clifford Goodrich . . 9

When a great industrialist is murdered; when huge experimental plants are sabotaged; when murder seems to be a small price in the game, there must be a terrific reason for it all. The Whisperer, long arm of justice, starts where the law leaves off to smash a plot that seeks the secret of world domination!

THRILLING STORIES AND FEATURES

EASTERN SHORE MURDER . . . . Ben Conlon 7

"Don't anybody move!" Truitt yelled. And nobody moved—because there was no one there except the dead man on the army cot. And Truitt had to dovetail this unexpected murder into a case that seemed screwy all the way through.

MESSENGER OF DEATH . . . . . Carter H. Holland . . 8

Double thought there might be a story when he saw the man stumble into the post office; when he saw the ribbon of blood trickle from beneath the man's trouser cuff to the floor. There was! It was a story of murder that almost cost Double his life.

CALLING ALL CARS! . . . . . Robert C. Blackmon . 9

Joe Hatchell awakened to hear the police radio blaring a call for his arrest. For murder! His buddy sat stiffly in the squad car beside him, dead! And Joe couldn't remember anything that had happened in the past hour.

WITH THE WHISPERER 5

Interesting notes about our stories and what we are planning for future issues.

COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designat either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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WITH THE WHISPERER

Headlines—news flashes—special bulletins—all these things are again becoming a very real part of our lives. With our defense program going into full swing; with important discussions going on in Washington every day; with momentous decisions to be made, our country is realizing what war—even war away from our shores—really means today.

From day to day, the picture changes. Everybody is speeding up production, trying to get things done that, we now realize, should have been done some years ago. Will we make it? Will we have everything in readiness when needed—if all these things will be needed?

With everything at such high tension, there are a great many possibilities for catastrophe. With factories operating at overload capacity, with men working under pressure, with mill wheels screaming for more and more production, how easy it can be to smash everything by simply making one tiny cog in the whole machine crack under the strain!

Clifford Goodrich knows what it means to work under such conditions; he knows what might happen, and often does happen, because he's worked in factories operating that way. This experience of his, plus his native ability in being able to weave an interesting story out of incidents familiar to all of us, has been marvelously combined in "The Secret Menace," the complete Whisperer novel which starts on Page 9 of this issue.

Unusual conditions present unusual difficulties, and when huge industrial enterprises are at stake; when the welfare of the country is in peril, then very often it is necessary to get other forces into play in addition to the regular police organizations. The Whisperer, the long arm of justice, which can reach into places the law is not permitted to touch, is the ideal means of smashing such evil attempts. And The Whisperer, when he undertakes to battle "The Secret Menace," finds himself in a really difficult spot.

You'll find this novel thrilling from start to finish. You'll find that it gives you much room for thought about things which are now of deep concern to every one of us. You'll like it, we know, for it's the best Whisperer novel thus far!

We enjoy receiving letters from our readers, regardless of what their opinions may be. Some of them like us; some don't. All of them have suggestions which are worth while, and sometimes, when we have the space, we like to pass them on to our readers.

For example, here's a letter from Francis McElhenny, 13 East Mahanoy Street, Mahanoy City, Pa.:

"I've just read the April issue of The Whisperer and I thought it was very good. I would like to know if I could get the first three issues that I missed. If I can, will you answer me and tell me how much I should send?

"The art work on the cover of your stories is very good. There are only two faults I can find with your magazine. They are, first, that there are no departments in it such as there are in other magazines, like *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*. There should be at least two pages given

over to a readers' corner, where the readers can see letters that others have written in, and where they can express their opinions and ask for changes they want in the magazine. How about it?

"The second fault, and the biggest one, is, why in Heaven's name can't The Whisperer be printed and published twice a month like *The Shadow*, or at least once a month, like *Doc Savage?* Why keep us waiting two months before we can get The Whisperer and some good reading? How about voting on these two things right away, and see what your readers think.

"I read *The Shadow* magazine regularly, and think it's the best book on the market, with The Whisperer a close second. Keep up the good work on your stories and don't be surprised if the fellows start kicking because you don't publish your book often enough."

Well, we'll answer this letter both personally, and also publicly here, because some of the questions are probably in the minds of many of our readers.

First, the back numbers of The Whisperer can be purchased from us according to the usual method of supplying these in the case of our other magazines. The price for back numbers is fifteen cents per copy, or any two copies for twenty-five cents. This extra charge is because of the extra handling and mailing cost of these back numbers. And the issues available are:

October, 1940, "Trail of Fear;" December, 1940, "Chariot of Fire;" February, 1941, "Killer from Nowhere;" April, 1941, "Death's Doublecross."

When ordering, be sure to specify the issues wanted by date as well as name of story, so as to avoid any possible mistake.

Next, as to the frequency of issue. That's a matter for the readers to decide, absolutely. And they've got to decide it by getting more and more readers to buy the magazine. We would like to publish The Whisperer as often as possible—even weekly. But putting out a magazine is an expensive proposition, and we have to sell quite a few of them to even break even. Most magazines like this one show steady losses until the readers build up to large numbers, and then it becomes profitable to print the magazine oftener. How about telling your friends about The Whisperer, and urging them to read it? People who are told about it like it; the difficulty is to have people learn that it is on the stands. If all our readers give us help in this respect by calling it to the attention of their friends, we stand a much better chance of more frequent publication very soon. It's up to you, folks, so let's see what you can do!

As for departments. Well, this is somewhat of a general clearing house for all things, and we often print letters from readers here. Whenever other subjects come up, we also treat of them here. We could, of course, start a half dozen departments, copying things that other people do, but we have learned that the best departments are the ones that spring up spontaneously from the readers. We are watching our mail closely, and in another couple of issues we feel that we will be able to pick out exactly the tone that our readers want, and then start such a department for them.

We get plenty of letters, and we want to get more. What our readers think is important to us, because we build the magazine for them.

Continued on page 112

A partial view of a department at Coyne

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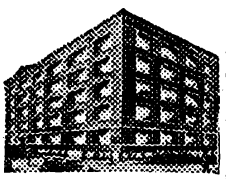

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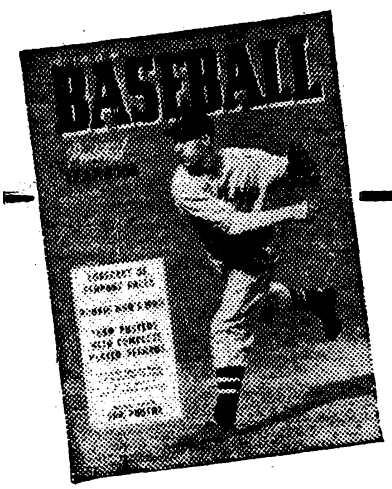

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The SECRET MENACE

A Complete Whisperer Novel

By Clifford Goodrich

Men fight and kill to get the secret that will give them power to rule the world—and only The Whisperer can thwart this disaster!

Crime scurried along the darkening streets of lower Manhattan like a dirty newspaper scudding before a light breeze. Furtive men hastened along in the shadows, burying their identities in the upturned collars of their coats.

They came singly and in pairs to a long, low building, perched on the edge of a dark slip that was a mere finger of dirty water stretching in from the East River. Inside, the building smelled of fish and stale cigar smoke. There were twenty or so straight-backed chairs in the single unheated room. When the chairs

were all filled with ugly, dart-eyed men, a figure moved with a queer gait of ponderous stealth toward a low platform that filled one end of the room.

He was a giant of a man with massive shoulders. Stringy black hair hung down the sides of his skull, touching his ears. He had a big nose that had been permanently flattened and a mouth that was wide and cruel, the jaw underslung. It was not difficult to understand why Mastiff Grenner had gotten his name. He was a giant dog of a man with the predatory instincts of a ruthless hunter.

Mastiff's eyes were black, opaque marbles as he surveyed the array of killers he had called together. His lips curled with sadistic cruelty, and he spoke in a voice that always amazed new acquaintances who watched his scarred and brutal features.

"We have but two duties to perform tonight," Mastiff said in tones that were a soft, silken threat. "And only one of those is murder."

There was no mistaking the regret in Mastiff Grenner's voice that the schedule was such a short one. The huge boss crook twisted his wide mouth into the semblance of a smile. He took a round, crumpled ball of paper from one pocket, flipped it through the air with the motion of a schoolboy snapping a spitball across the room. The crumpled paper sailed toward an undersized, long-nosed fellow who had ears like the handles on a loving cup.

"Your cancellation squad can handle that one, Sails," Mastiff Grenner said. "The name, the time and the place are all there."

The small killer with the monstrous ears was known as Sails Slenton. His "cancellation" squad was Mastiff Grenner's official execution unit. Sails pulled the crumpled paper out of the air with one talonlike hand, unfolded it and read with beady eyes that seemed red in color. Other thugs crowded behind him, looking over his shoulder. Mastiff Grenner did not care whether various members of his gang knew what other parts of it were doing. By discouraging secrecy, he was more able to keep check on his men. Any hint of insubordination or treachery usually reached his ears immediately from the lips of some crook who desired to curry favor.

The name on the crumpled paper was Maynard Nicholson, the address, a side street in Jersey City, and the time, 10 p. m. Sails Slenton grunted and looked quickly at his watch. It was then 9:25.

"We gotta move," the big-eared thug shrilled in a high, almost feminine, voice. "We can just about make it."

Sails trotted quickly out of the room, followed by three furtive thugs who wore shabby gray suits and caps pulled well down over their eyes. In the crowd of cohorts who had been looking over Sails' shoulder, one pale-eyed man hesitated. He, too, looked at a watch. Slowly, he began to edge toward the door. But the carefully modulated voice of Mastiff Grenner stopped him.

"This next job does not necessarily call for murder," he said. "But death may be involved. And it is the beginning of our most important assignment."

The nondescript, pale-eyed man glanced back toward the platform. His attitude was suddenly one of intense interest. Mastiff Grenner talked for several minutes in low, well-phrased words. His men nodded; some of them took notes on Mastiff's instructions.

All were tense, concentrated. Ap-

parently none noticed the gradual edging toward the door of the nondescript fellow with the pale eyes. As he slid quietly to the door, Mastiff Grenner was still talking.

"The boss says this is the biggest job that was ever pulled," he confided. "It isn't what we are instructed to do tonight, but the coup to which we are building."

The boys had heard rumors of some gigantic job ahead of them. They didn't know what it was, and they didn't think Mastiff knew much about it, either. Mastiff had one bad habit. He usually bragged too much. He hadn't bragged about knowledge of the details of this "coup." Nor had he bragged that he knew the identity of the silent, unseen master criminal who controlled the gang through him. From that, the gang deduced that Mastiff didn't know these two answers, himself.

Now, as the door swung closed, Mastiff's huge ugly-looking head came up. His beady, agate eyes glared with cruel decision. Mastiff had seen more than he had indicated.

"There goes Jeffers," Mastiff's voice growled. "I've been suspecting him. Now I have made up my mind. Get him!"

Snarling thugs whirled toward the door. They swept out into the night, a compact group that was murder-bent. None of them knew Jeffers beyond the fact that he had applied for admission to the gang. Could they have delved into his past, they would have recognized a man who had once been framed for a murder that he had not committed. They might have recalled that the person who had saved him was known to a shuddering underworld as The Whisperer, the long arm of justice that stretched into the cesspools of crime to snuff out those whose crooked trails defied capture and punishment by the normal branches of law enforcement.

Mastiff Grenner's mobbies didn't know that. They might have acted more swiftly if they had. But now they followed Jeffers to a phone booth in a dingy cigar store not far from the shed on the river front. They saw Jeffers dial a number, then begin to speak rapidly.

He was still speaking when the mobbies reached the phone booth and riddled it with bullets! Jeffers slumped and his eyes began to glaze.

It so happened that The Whisperer was already in Jersey City that night. His visit there had nothing to do with the gang of Mastiff Grenner. In fact, The Whisperer was masquerading to a certain extent.

A wrinkled black coat concealed the powerful shoulders of the compact foe of crime. His long, oddly pointed chin was buried in the upturned collar of the coat. A shapeless felt hat was pulled well down over the glittering, green eyes that seemed to glow with a weird luminescence. He had registered in a big book as he entered the meeting hall, using the name of D. Smith.

The underworld did not know that Dunk Smith was the dreaded Whisperer. It knew him only as a petty crook, a hanger-on at the fringe of crime's operations. But there seemed nothing criminal in the set-up of the hall in which Dunk Smith now hunched on a stiff wooden bench. The hall was one used by various lodges, neighborhood political organizations and traveling lecturers. Even now, two uniformed policemen mingled amiably with the crowd.

And the crowd itself included

many men of known respectability and influence in their communities. The Whisperer husked a whispered ejaculation to himself as he looked at a program handed to him by an attendant. The black-clad man's voice was an eerie, hissing whisper. Unconsciously, a man sitting next to him moved away.

The program identified the meeting as the monthly session of Hoe and Plow for America, a movement dedicated to decentralization of population and a concentration of back-to-the-soil employment to solve our economic ills. Its president was Taw Hayshker, according to the announcement. And the man who ascended the rostrum at that moment so identified himself.

Hayshker was a tall, skinny individual with a craggy nose, little gimlet eyes that twinkled with obvious humor and wide, friendly appearing lips that seemed to have been born clutching either a corncob pipe or a wisp of straw. He was clad in rough homespun pants and a hickory shirt.

He cleared his throat and began to speak in a thin, reedy voice that had a backwoods twang in it.

"The answer to our problems ain't in this here city," Taw Hayshker told his audience. "Ef we're goin' to find our way out o' the hills, we'll have to git gumption enough to leave the cities behind us."

There was more. But an interruption came at that moment. An attendant went down the aisle whispering softly to each row of members. "A phone call for Mr. D. Smith. The caller says it is urgent."

The Whisperer slid quickly to his feet. He knew instantly that the call must be urgent, for there was only one person in the world who knew where he had gone that night. He padded swiftly to the phone booth. The voice that came to him over the phone was a hollow boom that vibrated in the receiver like the report of a cannon.

"A message came over the automatic recorder that you ought to hear."

The big voice ceased then. There was a sound of a needle scratching and a thin, frightened voice came to The Whisperer. It was the voice of Jeffers, calling from the phone booth near the shed in which Mastiff Grenner had handed out instructions for murder.

"There are two jobs tonight," Jeffers' thin voice said. *"The most important one is sabotage of the IPRI plant on the Harlem River. But, first, a man named Maynard Nicholson is to be murdered at—"*

Jeffers' voice burst into a scream of terror. The scream was punctuated by the staccato sound of shooting. Then The Whisperer's undercover man gasped an address into the phone, his last words before death overtook him.

The address was that of the hall in which The Whisperer was receiving the phone message!

The Whisperer whipped out of the booth. The long arm of justice had reached to the hall of Hoe and Plow for America merely because it was his custom to check up on new organizations that came into being. He had had no reason to suspect—nor did he have any reason, now—that the Hoe and Plow was anything but a respectable movement.

But there were two other things that loomed suddenly in the mind of the nemesis of the underworld. He knew things that apparently had not been understood by the unfortunate Jeffers.

Maynard Nicholson was the vice

president of an electrical manufacturing concern that had recently gone bankrupt. And that firm had had extensive dealings with IPRI—otherwise known as the Institute for Physical Research in Industry—where sabotage was due on the night that Nicholson was scheduled to be murdered.

Those items flew from a kaleidoscope of thought and slipped into the proper channels of The Whisperer's mind as he raced out of the phone booth. The booth was near the men's washroom in the cellar of the building. Had it been slightly more convenient, The Whisperer might have saved some lives. But, unfortunately, it was not.

Shots thudded into the air before he had taken half a dozen steps toward the main floor! There was a scream of pain and terror. Then voices began to curse. The Whisperer plunged through the door from the lounge like a black-clad bullet. No one recognized him as the shabby individual who had gone down there a few moments before.

The slanted, almost oriental eyes blazed openly, now. The long-pointed chin was no longer buried in the collar of his coat. A queerly oversized weapon resembling some modernistic pistol of tomorrow was clutched in each compact hand.

He emerged in an oddly strategic position. The lobby of the hall was wide. Against the wall stood four crouching killers, led by Sails Slenton. To The Whisperer's left, making the third point of a triangle that was almost equilateral, were the two uniformed cops that he had seen earlier. Stretched out before them in a widening pool of blood was the body of Maynard Nicholson.

Lurid blue flame leaped from The Whisperer's oversized weapons. The only sound was an ominous hiss, like the warning of some giant snake about to strike. Lead tore through the neck of one of Sails Slenton's men. The man screamed, whirling around, his voice a bubbling gurgle that presaged death.

"T-t-the Whisperer!" he gasped, then sank to the floor.

Sails Slenton twisted. The odd red-tinged color of his eyes brightened. The expression of cruelty on his face changed to one of fear.

"Scram!" he piped. "Get going—*fast!*"

Sails tried to lead his two remaining aids into the night. One of them made the mistake of trying to cover their flight with bullets. He centered his automatic on The Whisperer. But there was another dab of blue flame and a hiss of warning that came too late. The killer sank to the floor. His face bore a look of stupid surprise which even an undertaker would not be able to erase.

The Whisperer whirled to give pursuit. But the two policemen in the hall prevented that. The two cops made a mistake that was unfortunately natural. They recognized The Whisperer and concluded that he was also an enemy of law and order who should be bagged. They kept right on shooting!

The Whisperer weaved and dodged. Clad in black, against the dim backdrop of the outside street, he was not an easy target. His greatest effort was expended in dodging in such a manner that the bullets from the police guns would not hit innocent pedestrians.

When he finally gained the nearby corner and drifted, wraithlike, into the dim obscurity of another side street, the two thugs were gone. Fate beyond his control had permitted murder to happen almost before his eyes. The honest error of

two policemen had aided the criminals' escape.

And now The Whisperer must move swiftly. He must reach quickly under a wide river and sweep up the streets of Manhattan to prevent other crime and, even more important, to find out why it was being planned. The foe of crime stepped into a parked coupé as black as the clothing he wore.

Head low, he drove straight past the hall in which Maynard Nicholson had just been murdered. Outside, the tall gangling form of Taw Hayshker towered above the two cops.

CHAPTER II.

A PLEA FOR HELP.

The black coupé shot ahead, turning toward the Pulaski Skyway for a fast trip to the Holland Tunnel and New York. As The Whisperer pushed the powerful car well beyond the speed limit, he pieced together what little he knew of a skein of crime that he was sure was now becoming a million-dollar tangle.

Of Maynard Nicholson, he knew only his position of wealth and eminence before the bankruptcy of his electrical concern. It seemed quite natural that this man who had taken a financial tumble might turn to a back-to-the-soil movement to solve his problems.

Of the Institute for Physical Research in Industry, known by most persons who read the financial or scientific columns of newspapers as IPRI, The Whisperer knew more. He knew that everything from a plastic for making cigarette lighters to a new principle of electric hoists that doubled the lifting power of giant cranes had come from those extensive laboratories.

He had also heard the vague rumor that something greater than anything yet produced by man was under experimentation at IPRI's closely guarded laboratories. Such a thing could explain a plan to commit sabotage on the plant. But it did not explain the murder of Maynard Nicholson, an impoverished and disillusioned man whose death seemingly could aid no one.

Just before he pulled onto the Skyway, The Whisperer drew up beside a drugstore. From a phone booth, he called the number of the IPRI plant on the Harlem River. The night switchboard operator answered, informed him that Joseph Bren Mulvane was not at the plant but was expected before midnight.

A chuckling whisper drifted over the wire; then the connection was broken. The Whisperer was gone.

He was, in fact, speeding over the skyway. Jade-green eyes glowed in the dimness of the coupé. Midnight. The message from Jeffers had said that the raid on IPRI would be at midnight. Now, he was informed that Joseph Bren Mulvane, the leonine, aggressive president of IPRI, would arrive at that time. Was Mulvane also a target; someone who would be killed if he got in the way? Or was he, for some obscure reason, a part of this plot?

The Whisperer did not have those answers. He had to unfold things as best he could. He knew only that the clock on the dashboard informed him that it was exactly 10:40. That allowed him just one hour and twenty minutes to find Mulvane and be on hand to prevent, if possible, the sabotage that had been ordered.

He knew that Mastiff Grenner was undoubtedly the one who had given those orders. Jeffers had told him that he was going to a gathering of Mastiff's gang that night. But The Whisperer also knew that

Grenner would not be operating for himself. He was the type of criminal who found it safer and more practical to hire out his talents by the job or by the day.

As he hurtled through the tunnel, out onto Canal Street in Manhattan and up onto the overhead speedway, The Whisperer decided upon an immediate plan of action. He had made good time. If he could now observe Joseph Bren Mulvane without letting the gray-haired industrialist know, it was possible that he could learn much.

It was with that plan in mind that he pushed the black coupé as fast as safety permitted toward the dark and malodorous Harlem River.

Joseph Bren Mulvane dwelt in a penthouse atop the one apartment building near his plant. The lobby of the building had been modernized and a new elevator had been installed. It did, however, have an old-fashioned iron fire escape bolted to the rear elevation that faced the darkness of the river.

The figure of The Whisperer was invisible as he climbed silently to the rooftop that formed Mulvane's private garden.

As he eased over the high parapet, a setting of affluence and good taste spread out before him. Walks of imported Italian tiles wound between well-gardened beds of rare blooms. Some tropical plants were covered with glass, heated by individual electric humidifier coils.

Through great French windows, The Whisperer could see Mulvane, sitting in the living room of his elaborate penthouse. He was a big man, with bushy eyebrows and a great shock of gray hair. Mulvane had a paunch which quivered slightly, now, as he shook a violently admonitory finger at a visitor.

The recipient of the admonishment was about six feet two and weighed close to two hundred and ten pounds. He was about twenty-six years old and had a rugged face and a mouth that turned down with an expression of irony. Followers of the sports pages four years before would immediately have recognized him as Edgerton Littleman, All-American fullback.

The Whisperer could hear no words. But knowing Littleman's reputation and seeing the look of rage that came over Mulvane's fleshy face, it was not difficult to assume that the ex-backfield star was exercising his unusual ability at sarcasm. Cautiously, the black-clad foe of crime eased near one of the penthouse windows. With a sharp tool he jimmied the window open enough so that he could hear the conversation between the two men. Mulvane's voice was a choleric bellow.

"Your uncle would give his shirt to know what I'm developing, Littleman. I'm probably a damn fool to even keep you around the plant!"

Edgerton Littleman's lips curled slightly.

"You don't need me around to keep your rating," he said in a flat voice. "You do pretty well by yourself."

It looked for a moment as if Joseph Bren Mulvane were going to break a blood vessel. The Whisperer shifted slightly to get a better view. He knew Littleman; knew that the former grid star had refused to join the firm of Littleman, Kent & Roundtree, rivals of IPRI. He'd said he could never get along with his uncle and had asked Mulvane for a job. Now, he was one of the junior partners.

Mulvane got his breath.

"W-why you young pup," he bellowed. "If we don't stop these

sabotage attempts damned soon, I'm going to ask the board of directors to throw you right out of the place."

Littleman grinned again. He started to answer. But there was a strident buzzing of an alarm. From where they sat, they could see a red light flashing on and off above the elevator, in an alcove off the living room. The indicator needle began to rise from the ground floor. Mulvane leaped to a house phone, pressed a button and located the attendant in the lobby. As he listened his expression changed from one of fear to one of satisfaction.

"The police," he explained. "I have asked for help to put down this sabotage and find out who is behind it."

The elevator reached the penthouse marker and the door automatically opened. The man who stepped out was big-shouldered, small-mouthed, had a nose like a slightly bent finger and tiny, close-set eyes that glittered oddly. When he saw Joseph Bren Mulvane he gave the impression that he was going to bow and scrape at any moment. Mulvane represented a good bit of power and money and Deputy Police Commissioner Henry Bolton was not one who remained unimpressed by that fact.

"Commissioner Gordon is not available, Mr. Mulvane," Henry complained in a nasal voice. "He doesn't seem to be paying any attention to business lately."

A voice like a foghorn rumbled behind Bolton.

"Rank perfidy due to overweening ambitions," it roared. "The truth don't never bother you if you think somethin' else'll get you somewhere, Henry."

Deputy Bolton's face reddened slightly. The man who had followed him from the elevator would have been worth a second look even in a circus. He had a chest something like Ringling's Gargantua, a bulletlike head that seemed miraculously tethered to the torso without the intervention of a neck, a jaw that reminded one of an angry bulldog and hands like fielders' mitts. Slug Minor, personal chauffeur for Commissioner James Wildcat Gordon had once been a longshoreman. He had changed into a dictionary-carrying constant-irritant to Henry Bolton.

"Shut up, Slug," Bolton whined. "All you're here for is to protect Mr. Mulvane."

Joseph Bren Mulvane cleared his throat.

"It is not for myself, gentlemen. It is the plant about which I am concerned. There have been efforts to sabotage our work. I fear—"

A loud shout and the sound of shooting interrupted him. Henry Bolton assumed a wise smile and let it be known that he was quite pleased with himself. There was a sound of running footsteps on the tiles outside on the roof. A bellowing voice fairly made the windows rattle.

"That way, you fools! That's the way he went."

Henry Bolton whipped out a gun and crowded out onto the roof. As he did, he explained to Mulvane:

"I sent my men up the fire escape. If you were by any chance being spied upon, I wanted to bag the intruder."

Then Bolton suddenly stopped talking. He was the vortex of a swirling mass of humanity. The mass seemed to have two principal component parts. One of them was a tall, gaunt individual with a hawk-like nose and a bald head garnished

only by two tufts of gray hair over his ears. This was Deputy Richard Traeger, retired, but a close friend and unofficial aid of Wildcat Gordon. He was better known as old Quick Trigger. The other principal part of the whirling mass was The Whisperer. There were other cops involved—so many that neither Bolton nor Slug Minor dared use their guns.

The Whisperer whirled, a dimly visible being. Quick Trigger seemed ever about to seize him, and the other cops appeared too busy to do anything except keep pace with Quick and The Whisperer. The heavy, oversized guns spewed blue flame. No lead tore into the flesh of the policemen. But two slugs whizzed so close to Henry Bolton's head that he instinctively leaped back to protect himself. Henry was not a man who desired to give his life away like that.

In that instant, the whirling figure in black swept through the apartment and into the elevator, the door of which was still open. The cops rushed the elevator. They were all brave men. And they had standing orders to apprehend The Whisperer. Bolton had promised instant promotion to the man who bagged him. The rush of men caught Bolton and Quick Trigger with it. The door of the elevator was sliding closed. Bolton, Quick and two of the cops were shoved into the cage with The Whisperer. Then the doors snapped shut and the cage began to descend.

Bolton had extremely little chin. But what he did have took a short, hard jab from The Whisperer. The long-nosed deputy immediately lost interest in the proceedings. He slumped to the floor of the cage. Later, one of the cops admitted falling from an uppercut. The other cop was never quite sure. He had, at first, thought that he was slugged at the same instant that The Whisperer was knocking out his companion.

But it was a matter of record that the cage stopped at the second floor. It was also a matter of record that Quick Trigger was the first of the four to recover and that he revived Henry Bolton.

What was not a matter of record was that the wraithlike scrapper who disappeared down the dimness of the old apartment hallway began to undergo a transformation. He ran lightly down a flight of stairs that led to the foyer outside of the elevator lobby. An odd set of dental plates came from his mouth. The chin immediately lost its queer length and became as square and uncompromising as a block of granite. Greenish contact lenses came from his eyes, leaving them a hard, arctic blue. Tiny sutures of invisible tape at the corners of the eyes came loose, robbing the eyes of their oriental slant. A quick brush of one hand dusted a black powder from the hair and left it brown in shade. Black garments dropped, revealing a smart, tan gabardine suit. Black spats came away from two-tone black-and-white Oxfords. All that clothing made a neat pile that was deposited in a dim corner of the outer foyer.

The man who strode briskly into the elevator lobby, barking questions in crisp, staccato tones was Police Commissioner Wildcat Gordon. For The Whisperer was merely a disguise that Wildcat used to trap criminals who were protected by politics or who managed to hide behind red tape that could not be swiftly cut by a more orthodox approach. And the only man alive who knew of that dual identity was old Quick Trigger. Quick had

manufactured the dental plates that made the disguise a possibility.

As Wildcat demanded that something be done about the elevator, he glanced anxiously at his watch. What he saw brought a low mutter of distaste. It was precisely one minute past midnight, the hour set for serious sabotage of the IPRI plant.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET KEY.

In that instant the elevator indicator began to move. The cage dropped to the lobby floor and the doors slid open. Henry Bolton plunged from the cage, revolver in his hand.

"He must have got to the street," he yelled. "We got to get him."

He bumped smack into Wildcat.

"Who?" Wildcat Gordon snapped. "Who've you got to get, Henry?"

Bolton's small fishlike mouth made gulping motions. He pawed the air ineffectually with his free hand. Capturing The Whisperer, was one of Bolton's two main aims in life; his second was to replace Wildcat Gordon as commissioner.

"T-the Whisperer," he mumbled. "H-he—"

Henry's face got red. He couldn't bring himself to admit to Wildcat that the mysterious man of the underworld had tricked him.

Wildcat ignored his embarrassment. The two uniformed cops in the cage had revived by that time. Quick Trigger stood behind Bolton, blinking owlishly. The older man seemed to squint, as if his eyesight were not all that it should be. But he could see all right; he often saw a lot of things that were not apparent to the eye.

"All of you go to the IPRI plant immediately," Wildcat snapped. "Arrest any suspicious characters that you find around the grounds. I'll join you right away, but I want to talk to Mulvane first."

Wildcat whirled on his heel, strode into the open elevator. The lift was of the self-operating type. Wildcat punched the penthouse button and the cage moved swiftly and silently toward the luxury quarters of IPRI. Wildcat did not desire to waste any time in getting to the plant. But he figured that Mulvane might be able to give him information as to what part of the plant would most likely be endangered by saboteurs. That would save important time.

Mulvane, Littleman and Slug Minor almost tore the doors down trying to get into the lift. The bushy-haired industrialist stared incredulously at the brisk, stocky commissioner. He darted a glance over Wildcat's shoulder into the now empty cage.

"W-w-where—" he began.

"Your plant is in danger," Wildcat snapped. "What part of it is the most likely spot for your enemies to strike?"

Mulvane's fleshy face paled, and his lips worked strangely. He seemed torn by conflicting emotions.

"Why, it would be—" He ran a dry tongue over his lips and fear came into his eyes. He looked suddenly at the door of the elevator. The motor of the automatic lift sounded faintly. Mulvane glanced right and left.

"Littleman!" he blurted. "He's gone!"

Fear, suspicion and hatred mixed in Mulvane's excited tone. He ran one hand nervously through his bushy hair and opened his mouth as if to say something else. Wildcat looked around quickly, shot a questioning glance at Slug.

"He's right, commissioner," the

burly cop rumbled. "This other guy was right here when you came in."

Just then a hollow, metallic voice sounded from the far end of the room.

"Joe! It's happening. Get the police and get over here quickly!"

Wildcat whirled around. A greenish television screen against one wall glowed with life. The face that loomed there was gaunt and weary-looking. The man had large, staring eyes, a broad forehead and an oval, sensitive chin. A wispy lock of hair hung over one eye.

"A bomb just exploded in the east sheds, Joe," his mournful voice informed them. "I'm going out and see what I can do."

The man seemed to sway back into the luminescence of the screen, seeming to diminish in size until, as he took a submachine gun from a rack behind him, he appeared to be only a midget. But that, of course, was merely a trick of position of the television camera.

Joseph Bren Mulvane gasped.

"Thank goodness Andre Selm is there to protect us," he groaned. "Let's get over there."

Wildcat Gordon was ahead of him. He had already punched the button to summon the automatic elevator. The doors were sliding open as Mulvane spoke. Wildcat waved Slug and half a dozen of his uniformed patrolmen into the lift. Mulvane crowded in with them. As the cage descended, Wildcat demanded to know something about Andre Selm.

"He's my most valuable associate," Mulvane explained. "Andre's been with me twenty years. I don't think I could get along without him."

The huge, barbed-wire-inclosed plant of IPRI was only two blocks from Mulvane's apartment. Quick Trigger and Bolton had taken the two police sedans. Slug Minor leaped to the wheel of a green emergency truck standing before the apartment house. The rest of the party clambered into the benchlike seats behind.

Siren screaming, Slug zipped down the street toward the main-entrance gate. Activity within the plant immediately became apparent. It was something like an air raid. Showers of sparks shot up into the black night like Roman candles. There were dull booms as chemicals exploded with terrific detonation. Wildcat Gordon glanced at the pale face of Joseph Bren Mulvane. The industrialist seemed paralyzed with fear.

"If . . . if—" he buried his head in his hands and moaned. "Oh, no! It can't be!"

Wildcat did not bother to question Mulvane on any subject that needed lengthy explanation. He merely asked him simple questions about the layout of the plant that the police would have to know in order to fight the saboteurs inside. Mulvane gave those answers as simply as he could.

At the main gate they were met by Andre Selm. The man was short and thin; he probably would not have tipped the scales at more than a hundred and twenty-five pounds. His pinched features were lined and harried; fear was mirrored in his eyes. At his feet stretched the body of another man who had a watchman's time clock strapped to his shoulder.

Mastiff Grenner's men had found murder on the calendar. Wildcat Gordon did not pause to take in much of the scene. They were fleeting impressions received on the run.

"They're in the east sheds," Andre Selm's sepulchral voice said hollowly. "There are some policemen

over there already."

Slug Minor let out a yell and plunged through the darkness toward the sound of the excitement. Red tongues of flame licked up into the night air. The detonation of bombs or some other planted explosives mingled with the staccato bark of police guns. Screams of pain and death welled up into the blackness.

Wildcat rounded a brick storehouse and came face to face with the sheds. The whole place was a mass of flame. A low concrete wall bisected the plant at that juncture. Stabs of flame redder and sharper than the mass of the fire made pinpricks in the crimson curtain of heat. Staccato reports came with them and lead whizzed past the crouching policemen. Wildcat barked quick orders based on the description of the plant given him by Mulvane.

"Spread out and close in fanwise. The only way out is behind us. We've got them trapped."

One head stuck slightly above the masonry wall. The high-pitched, feminine voice of Sails Slenton shrilled into the air.

"Use the Tommy-guns, boys. Mow 'em down!"

Brrrrrrrrt! Brrrrrrrt!

The Tommy-guns spoke like riveting hammers of death. Two uniformed policemen groaned and sank convulsively to the smoking ground. Wildcat edged slowly to the left. Quick Trigger was close behind him. Cautiously, the young commissioner moved in on Sails Slenton. The thug who had handled the murder of Maynard Nicholson in Jersey City had apparently come up to Harlem to take entire charge of this branch of Mastiff Grenner's mob.

Sails Slenton saw Wildcat just as the two Police Positives in the commissioner's hands were coming up. Sails yelled in a frenzy of hatred and fear and whipped around with his Tommy-gun. Booming detonations that sounded like a brace of sixteen-inch naval guns roared behind Wildcat. Quick Trigger was getting into action with the ancient horse pistols that he fancied over more modern armament.

Slenton looked suddenly foolish and twisted around like a marionette on a string. Then he slumped. Another burly machine gunner whipped up into his place. Wildcat was moving then. But the burly one followed him with the muzzle of the Tommy. Wildcat Gordon dropped flat and rolled. His two .38s spoke sharply and the killer joined Sails Slenton wherever it was he had gone.

The remaining thugs showed fear, then. Apparently, Wildcat and Quick Trigger had eliminated their two leaders. The roaring yell of Slug Minor blasted like a foghorn. Slug leaped over the wall and into a cluster of four crouching gunmen. Slug dropped his gun, sailed in with his huge hands. The sound of cracking bone could be heard a dozen feet.

The rest of the mobbies ran then. Wildcat set himself to prevent escape toward the main gate. He could hear the wail of fire sirens there, anyway. He rapped orders to Quick, to Bolton and to the rest of the force to keep the gangsters penned in. Suddenly, there was a belch of smoke from the curtain of fire before them. Suspecting a trick, Wildcat yelled to his men.

"Back!" he snapped. "Back slowly toward the main gate. They won't be able to get past us."

The reasoning was sound, on the basis of information given to Wildcat by Joseph Mulvane. But a light

breeze took the smoke cloud then, wafting it out over the Harlem River. Aside from the crackling of flame, the east sheds were quiet. The only gunmen that could be seen were dead ones. The others had vanished as completely as if some jinni from Arabian Nights had plucked them from the land of the living!

Rubber-clad fire fighters crowded up behind Wildcat and Quick Trigger. A huge pumper rolled in and hooked up to a hydrant inside the plant. Streams of water under terrific pressure hissed through the air, knocking down partitions that hid flaming pockets of danger.

Shoulder to shoulder with the firemen, Wildcat and his men moved into the charred wreckage that had been the east sheds of IPRI, their guns were ready to halt the flight of killers who might be lurking in the ruins. But there were none. When the last bit of red flame had been extinguished, Wildcat completely realized that Mastiff Grenner's mobsters had escaped. The young commissioner whirled on Joseph Bren Mulvane, who had come up from behind. But before Wildcat had a chance to demand an explanation, Mulvane began to scream like a man gone insane. He pointed toward a rectangular hole in the heavy stone wall of a low-roofed building. Mulvane's voice dropped to a guttural croak:

"The power tunnel!" he gasped. "That's the way they came in. They've escaped through it!"

Gaunt, harried Andre Selm crouched beside Wildcat. He turned his dark, staring eyes toward the commissioner. Wildcat asked him what the power tunnel might be.

"A big testing tube," Selm told

THE WHISPERER

● A low, mirthless chuckle, an awesome whisper of defiance, as a half-visible wraith moves through the night. Criminals flee at this eerie challenge, for it announces the arrival of the mysterious nemesis of crime, for whom there are no rules or regulations deterrent in the path of justice—

The Whisperer.

him in his hollow voice. "We could use it for a wind tunnel or a water tunnel. It had considerable equipment in it. The other end is beside a small dock on the river."

Wildcat Gordon's hard blue eyes narrowed. Joseph Mulvane *had* told him that the only exit that the mobsters could use was the main gate. Mulvane was raging again at tall, sardonic Edgerton Littleman. The big ex-football star looked down at the bushy-haired industrialist with

an expression that might have been one of amusement.

"You designed the combination lock that we used on the power tunnel," Mulvane bellowed, shaking one fist under the nose of his younger subordinate. "You insisted on installing that combination lock. This is your doing, Littleman!"

Mulvane whirled toward Wildcat.

"Littleman, Kent & Roundtree are trying to break me, commissioner," he shouted. "If they can get me out of the way, they will have undisputed control in the field of industrial research of this type. I demand that something be done about it!"

Edgerton Littleman's lips were still turned down in sardonic speculation. He spoke to Wildcat without turning. His voice was a flatly sarcastic one.

"He's getting like a man who suspects his wife," the ex-grid star rasped. "No matter how virtuous she might be, he'll never believe her."

Mulvane's heavy features went a beet-red. He struggled to find words and his lips worked in an expression of rage and indignation.

"It . . . it's a lie," he finally managed.

Wildcat swung around to the bushy-haired industrialist.

"Perhaps," he snapped. "But there is one thing that I want to know. What is there in this experimental laboratory that makes murder and sabotage so worth while? What is hidden here, Mulvane, that is so important?"

Wildcat Gordon's hard blue eyes bored into Joseph Mulvane. The color drained from the industrialist's face, and he clenched and unclenched his fists. He tried to meet Wildcat's steady gaze but found he could not.

"It . . . I won't—" Mulvane clamped his heavy lips shut. "At the moment," he gritted, "that is none of your concern."

He swung on his heel and bellowed at Andre Selm:

"Wheelock and Mansfield have been sent for. They should be here, now. We will hold a board meeting immediately."

Mulvane turned to stride off toward the main administration building, but Wildcat stopped him for one more question.

"Was anything of great value destroyed in this sabotage attempt?" he demanded.

Mulvane looked at him for a moment. His eyes flickered strangely.

"No," he said finally. "Even though we are insured for all loss, there is nothing I can claim but the value of the sheds themselves. And they are of negligible importance."

With that, Mulvane strode off to the main offices of IPRI.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOARD MEETS.

Wildcat let him go. The young commissioner wondered about a meeting of a board of directors after midnight. But Joseph Mulvane was known to be eccentric. And in his experimental business it was probable that matters of considerable importance arose unexpectedly.

But what did concern Wildcat was Mulvane's refusal to reveal the nature of the sensational development that seemed certain to lay behind this new onslaught of violence and death. The industrialist even refused to admit that such a development might exist.

Furthermore, if Mulvane told the truth about his negligible losses of this night, the saboteurs had been extremely amateurish; they had

killed a watchman and two cops and had lost at least three of their own number without accomplishing anything. But the alternative was that, if Mulvane did not tell the truth, he was deliberately refusing to insist that insurance companies pay a lawful claim that might run into a great deal of money.

With those problems on his mind, Wildcat Gordon started a systematic search of the huge grounds of the Institute for Physical Research in Industry. He instructed Quick Trigger, Slug and Bolton to take over certain parts of the grounds so that nothing might be missed.

"We may find either a clue to what this is all about," Wildcat decided, "or we might find some thug who didn't get away with his companions."

The commissioner did not take any cops with him. It occurred to him that it was possible he might run into information that for the present he might want to share with no one. He walked quietly toward the low, rambling administration building where the board of directors was scheduled to meet. The two names Mulvane had mentioned, Wildcat knew, completed the list of board members of IPRI. Bart Wheelock and Gregory Mansfield were co-directors with Mulvane, Selm and Littleman. The latter three held executive posts appointive by the full board.

The administration building was somewhat weird in appearance as Wildcat strode toward it. Perhaps because IPRI was engaged in testing various types of fluorescent lighting, a dozen different experimental tubes were tried out, using the administration offices as a testing ground. Some of them were jarring to the eyeballs, others were soft fluorescents.

Wildcat strode half the length of the building, keeping fifty feet or more from the wide windows that made almost an entire glass wall of one side of the structure. Suddenly, he grunted in surprise and flattened onto a dark niche of another small building. Behind one of the big windows, Wildcat Gordon saw a tableau of strong emotion, though one that did not at the moment tell him much.

Edgerton Littleman stood beside a highly polished table. His lips had lost their sardonic touch of irony. His mobile, expressive features were tense. But Wildcat could not read the emotion that lay beneath them. It was as if two parts of the ex-grid star's mind were in conflict; as if part of him were rebelling against what the rest was doing or about to do.

Littleman stood, hands clenched at his sides. The only other person in the room, which seemed to be some sort of a testing chamber, was a girl. It was difficult to tell what her face would have looked like in repose. It was not in repose at the moment. The expression on her features was not difficult to translate —anger, intense anger. And with her rage, there was a peculiar fear that shone starkly in her eyes.

Wildcat whistled softly to himself and walked silently toward the building that housed the room. The exchange between those two was so electric, that he knew they would not notice him. He watched the girl particularly. She was blond. A modish fall suit of greenish tweed did nothing to hide her figure that was, to say the least, pleasing. She shook one dainty fist under the unhappy face of Edgerton Littleman.

Wildcat could hear no words. He could catch but little by lip reading.

"You wouldn't dare!" the girl said.

Her eyes blazed; two flaring bits of torch-blue. "Even if you would, I wouldn't let you!"

The emotion in her seemed to reach a sudden peak. With a wrench, she tore open the handbag and whipped out a nickel-plated automatic! She took one quick step forward, looked straight into Edgerton Littleman's face. Irony touched the big man's lips, then. He said something that Wildcat could not catch by lip reading. Whatever it was, it stopped the girl. She faltered, the gun wavering in her hand. Then she shrugged, shoulders drooping.

Her back was toward Wildcat by that time. The commissioner was racing toward a small door in the side of the building. He couldn't see her face. But he could tell that sobs were wracking her body. Cursing softly to himself, Wildcat plunged into the building. The door, fortunately, was unlocked. He found himself in a corridor, the walls of which were glass. He could still see the room in which Littleman and the girl were standing. The girl's back was toward him. Littleman's face was still impossible to read. The big athlete took one step toward the girl.

Then there was a jangling of a bell. A red light began to flash on and off beside a dial on one side of the room.

Too late, Wildcat realized what sort of a testing room the two had selected for their encounter. This was a burglar-alarm testing room.

Littleman's lips did drop into sardonic mirth, then. He leaped to an electric chart near the alarm bell and quickly jabbed a button. And the floor dropped out from beneath Wildcat! He plunged into a dizzy pit of darkness and struck a smooth incline that slid him to a concrete floor.

Wildcat landed with a thump. He scrambled to his feet, whipping out a small pencil flash he always carried. He flicked it on and found himself in a concrete cubicle without windows. There was, however, a doorlike aperture that led to a flight of concrete steps that went upward. Wildcat mounted them three at a time to a second door that let him back into the glass-walled corridor from which he had fallen.

The testing room was empty, now. The girl had disappeared. But the broad-shouldered Edgerton Littleman was hurrying down the corridor.

"Hey, you!" Wildcat snapped. "Stay right where you are!"

Edgerton Littleman stopped. He turned around, an expression of surprise on his lips. Whatever else he might or might not be, Littleman was definitely an actor. He looked at Wildcat for a moment. A smile played faintly about his lips. Then he came back down the corridor. His eyebrows lifted slightly.

"You want me?" he asked flatly.

Wildcat's eyes narrowed. This man was not going to be easy. He had an amount of self-assurance that, under the circumstances, was more than surprising.

"Yes, I want you!" he snapped. "And I want that girl you were talking to."

Littleman's eyebrows went up a little higher.

"Girl? What girl?" He looked around him. "I don't see any girl. Do you?"

"Don't stall, damn it," Wildcat bellowed. "I saw you talking to a blond girl in that office."

Wildcat pointed toward the testing room, and Littleman maintained the level of his eyebrows. He didn't say anything.

"I'm going to find out who that

girl is," Wildcat said flatly, "or we'll do some of the questioning down at headquarters."

Something seemed to happen to Edgerton Littleman's eyes. It was as if they receded into his skull. The lips lost their curve of irony. His flat voice was almost a snarl.

"I suppose you *could* do that. But it wouldn't get you anywhere."

Wildcat Gordon moved one hand toward the pocket that held his handcuffs. Then he changed his mind. There were undercurrents here of fear, of hate, of suspicion of one man against another. Sweating Littleman would probably yield nothing of value. There was a strength, a steel-spring resistance, to the man. And, which was also important, Wildcat had no proper reason to put him under the third degree.

Behind Littleman, Wildcat saw a door open in the end of the corridor. The bushy hair and fleshy jowls of Joseph Bren Mulvane were outlined against the panel. Wildcat guessed that the big president of IPRI had come to call Littleman to the conference. The commissioner looked hard at the big athlete.

"For the moment, you get away with it," he snapped. "But don't think you are bluffing anybody."

A mere flicker in Littleman's eyes told Wildcat that the ex-football player did know he wasn't fooling anyone. Mulvane's bellowing tones interfered with further conversation.

"You're holding us up, Littleman," the industrialist rasped. "And I personally hope that it will be for the last time."

Leaving no possible doubt as to his meaning, Mulvane turned on one heel and disappeared through the doorway. With a shrug of his big shoulders, Littleman pushed through the door after Mulvane.

Wildcat Gordon followed them to the doorway and glanced into the big board room. The sight of one object in the room drew a grunt of surprise from his lips. Smiling tightly, Wildcat turned back to the corridor. Halfway to the nearest exit door, he stopped. On the floor he saw a brightly colored piece of paper. It looked not unlike a travel folder.

Quickly, Wildcat stooped, picked it up. The name Hoe and Plow for America was emblazoned in flowing script. There was a halftone cut of Taw Hayshker smoking a corncob pipe and half a dozen excerpts from speeches made by the rustic back-to-the-soil exponent.

The commissioner's eyes narrowed slightly. There didn't seem to be any definite link to crime's pattern here. But he was quite certain of one thing: that bright pamphlet had not been on the floor when he had stopped Littleman a few minutes before. That meant that it had undoubtedly been dropped by either Littleman or Mulvane. And there was still the unexplained coincidence that one of the two jobs handed out by Mastiff Grenner to his mobbies had been in the Jersey City hall of the Hoe and Plow organization.

Wildcat shoved the pamphlet into his pocket. There was a maze to be untangled here, no doubt. But first, he had a specific plan that might bring him other information. Swiftly he left the building, took a police whistle from one pocket and shrilled a signal to his aids. When they arrived, Wildcat gave them simple instructions. He told Slug Minor and Henry Bolton to stay on the grounds until after the board meeting had finished. He took Quick along with him.

Quick had a police sedan parked outside. He and Wildcat climbed into that and moved out into the dark street.

And half a block away, a black coupé without lights glided out to follow them. Neither of them noticed the pursuing machine. Wildcat was busy outlining plans to old Quick Trigger.

Two blocks away, Quick pulled up at the curb. Wildcat flashed his badge to the uniformed guard in the elevator lobby of Mulvane's apartment building. It was unnecessary, however, because the attendant recognized him anyway. He cheerfully handed Wildcat a passkey to Mulvane's penthouse apartment.

Inside the penthouse, Wildcat stepped quickly to the television set through which Mulvane had received the message from Andre Selm earlier in the night. He twisted dials until he got the set working. The greenish luminescence flashed brightly and the board room of IPRI became both visible and audible.

Back in that corridor of the IPRI building Wildcat Gordon had recognized the gun rack from which he had earlier seen Selm take a machine gun after broadcasting over the television set.

The commissioner had gambled that the same set would permit him to sit in on the board of directors' meeting without the knowledge of the members.

And so it turned out to be. Mulvane, as president and chairman of the board, presided. The only faces that Wildcat had not already seen were those of Bart Wheelock and Gregory Mansfield, the remaining directors summoned by Mulvane. Both of them were mousy, retiring individuals. They seemed obviously to be greatly impressed by Mulvane.

The leonine president wasted little time in getting under way.

"Gentlemen," he said in his bellowing voice, "attempts at sabotage have been going on in our plant for several months. We have not reported these attempts to the authorities for reasons with which you are all familiar."

Mulvane paused with dramatic emphasis. The nods from the various directors indicated plainly that they did indeed know the reasons for not informing the authorities of the attempts to sabotage the tremendous experimental plant that represented the major wealth and livelihood of them all. While they nodded in agreement, Joseph Mulvane went on.

"Four years ago some of you questioned the advisability of taking into our firm the nephew of the president of one of our principal rivals, Littleman, Kent & Roundtree."

Mulvane paused again and looked at Edgerton Littleman. Beside Mulvane, Andre Selm sat suddenly erect. The expression on his gaunt, unhappy looking face gave the impression that the thought of treachery from within was not to be believed.

"W-w-why, if he—" Selm couldn't finish it. Mulvane did it for him.

"In my opinion, gentlemen, Edgerton Littleman should be relieved of executive responsibility. He will, of course, still hold his stock if he does not desire to sell it. But under the present circumstances, I believe that the executive direction should be handled exclusively by myself and Andre Selm."

Selm struggled to his feet, fighting for words that seemed to burn his thin, haggard lips.

"If . . . if what you think is true, Joe," he moaned. "It is probably

already too late. H-he—"

Again, Selm's words died off into a whisper. Mulvane tossed his head in irritation.

"It is the best we can do," he snapped. "I call for a vote."

Wildcat and Quick Trigger watched the secret balloting. Only four directors voted.

Edgerton Littleman abstained. He stood at one side, his sardonic smile set on his lips. His eyes burned strangely, with a cold confidence that, seemingly, nothing could shake. His lips tightened only slightly as he watched Joseph Mulvane open the four ballots and read them. The president of IPRI cleared his throat.

"It seems we are unanimous," he rumbled. "The executive services of Mr. Littleman are no longer required."

He bowed slightly, as if in apology, to Littleman. Then he suggested that the meeting adjourn. It did.

CHAPTER V.

TRAP AND REPRIEVE

Wildcat turned to old Quick.

"We've learned all we can, here," he said briskly. "And I think things are likely to move pretty fast."

Quick grunted, looked questioningly at the youthful police commissioner. Quick did not like the speculative tone with which Wildcat finished his remarks; he had heard them before. The retired deputy had long been practically a guardian of Wildcat. He had been a close friend of Wildcat's father, when the senior Gordon had been police commissioner.

When Wildcat had been a boy, his father had often complained that politics and the red tape of routine tied his hands and frequently prevented the apprehension of criminals. Then, the young Wildcat Gordon had sworn that, if he ever rose to a position of power in the police department, he would find a way to circumvent the deterrence of red tape and politics.

The Whisperer had been the answer to that problem. And Quick had learned that when Wildcat grew speculative, The Whisperer was usually about ready to make his appearance. This worried the older man, because he was certain that some day that disguise which he himself had helped to make would get his friend and protégé into a spot from which he would not be able to extricate himself.

"Gosh, Wildcat," old Quick mumbled, "take it easy. You can't—"

Wildcat cut him off.

"A man was apparently needlessly killed in New Jersey. Sabotage was committed on the Harlem River. And both were ordered by Mastiff Grenner. He has to be the key."

Quick grunted in agreement. He couldn't contest that logic.

"So," Wildcat finished, "the Whisperer will call on Grenner."

Quick objected. But it didn't do him any good. Once decided on a definite plan of action, Wildcat moved rapidly. He plunged into the elevator and descended to the lobby. Quick Trigger kept right beside him.

Wildcat snatched up a dim bundle from a corner of the outer foyer as they left the building. It consisted of The Whisperer's black clothing and supersilenced guns. As the two men strode to the police sedan, Wildcat swiftly outlined his plans.

Quick tooled the sedan around a corner and into a darker street, Wildcat worked swiftly. He restored the greenish contact lenses, sutured the corners of his eyes with

invisible tape and dusted black powder into his brown hair. The queer dental plates distorted his jaw line into the oddly-pointed chin, and The Whisperer was reborn.

At the darkest part of the street, Quick Trigger dimmed his lights, pulled the sedan up to the curb. Half a block behind the police sedan, another car—without any lights showing at all—also pulled to a halt.

It was impossible for anyone to see the movement of The Whisperer. The ghostlike figure drifted from Quick's machine into the night. As invisible as he, was the black coupé he had parked there when he had come from New Jersey. As Quick Trigger shot his sedan ahead, The Whisperer slid in behind the wheel of his coupé and started the motor. Quietly, he moved out into the street behind the police car.

It is doubtful that anyone in the other car that followed, lightless, could have seen that quick transfer of The Whisperer. But the identity of the half-visible driver of the second car was not long a secret. At the next corner, Quick Trigger just slid under a changing light. The Whisperer stopped, waited for the green clear signal.

Then, as he again meshed the gears of the coupé, there drifted from his lips the eerie, awesome whisper that was a constant challenge to the underworld. A gasp came from the driver of the other lightless car. The Whisperer turned in a different direction from the one Quick Trigger had taken. The driver of the pursuing car seemed to hesitate as to which quarry should be followed. Then, finally, he swung around the corner behind The Whisperer.

The black coupé slid down Third Avenue, over to Park and downtown to city hall. A left turn there, brought the foe of crime into the shadow of Brooklyn Bridge. By one of the stone abutments there, a shabby man sat on an old orange crate, warming his hands on the flickering blaze of a bonfire. The Whisperer stopped. He got out of the car and padded softly over to the bonfire. For perhaps a dozen seconds, he seemed to be warming his own hands there. Then he left the shabby man and the blaze. He tooled his coupé to a darker, more segregated spot and left it.

The Whisperer looked at his watch. It was two thirty in the morning. He huddled close to the building. Three times he glanced at the watch. When half an hour had gone by, the ghostly chuckle escaped his lips, sharp and bitter with challenge. He moved like a silent dark cloud through the streets of the water front. The smell of fish and dirty water drifted to his nostrils.

The Whisperer was following in the footsteps taken the night before by Rubberneck Jeffers, the undercover man who had paid with his life for aiding the long arm of justice. Half a block behind him another figure stepped from a black car. The Whisperer did not turn to see whether he was being followed. So he did not see the dim form of the girl he had previously seen in bitter argument with Edgerton Littleman.

A block from the long shedlike headquarters in which Mastiff Grenner had given out his murder assignments, The Whisperer detoured slightly: He drifted into a dark alleyway, then wound a tortuous course through dingy yards that were littered with old bottles, cans and papers. Above him, clotheslines on pulleys made a dim skeleton

against the dark sky.

Picking his way silently along fences and through passageways, he swung back toward the street, climbed the low flat roof of what he knew to be a row of stores. He hung silently over the edge of that roof, watching and listening.

At first he saw nothing. Then a pin point of red glowed brightly, subsided again. Someone had taken a big drag on a cigarette. A voice followed that, a grating unpleasant voice.

"If that guy's goin' to get here, he'd better hurry up," it snarled. "I ain't goin' to freeze here all night for nothin'."

His companion grunted.

"Shut up! Mastiff's paying us good dough for this. An' if we do get The Whisperer, there'll be a bonus we can take a trip on."

The dim figure leaning over the edge of the roof above them repressed a chuckle. He started to move. But in that instant, The Whisperer discovered that he was not alone on the low flat roof. Three dim shapes launched themselves at the crime foe!

The eerie, ghostly challenge welled up into the early morning air. Compact fists pistoned up, smashing against flesh and bone. The Whisperer seemed to erupt like a volcano that was spewing fists instead of lava. Three snarling, twisting thugs massed into a raging tangle. They were unable to use their guns because of the almost certainty that they would kill or wound each other. The whispering hiss of defiance still came from the lips of The Whisperer. With a final chuckle and one mighty heave, he forced the tangle of arms and legs of which he was the center over the edge of the roof.

Thugs screamed as they hurtled through the air to the sidewalk below. The drop was not a particularly long one; scarcely more then fifteen feet. But there was a lot of weight on top of the two thugs who landed on the bottom of the heap. One of them didn't get up at all. His neck was broken. A second screamed with the pain of a broken arm. The third thug did not want to face the long arm of justice alone. He turned to flee.

But reinforcements came up then! They came from all sides. Apparently, Mastiff Grenner had taken no chances of an insufficient force. The Whisperer got in two shots with his supersilenced pistols. Then massed forces struck him from behind, and the weight of numbers was more than he could combat. Slowly he was borne to the sidewalk.

Mastiff Grenner's gang of killers worked well together. They were like a team, each thug performing a predetermined task. Swiftly, they bound The Whisperer. One ugly killer with dope-dilated eyes began to kick the black-clad scrapper. He pulled a knife from one sleeve.

"I'm goin' to finish this bird off, now," he muttered.

But a huge, barrel-chested man with a scarred face intervened. The Whisperer knew this thug; knew that the police would like to get evidence to put him in the electric chair for any one of seven murders they were sure he had committed. But Skip Krausmeyer always seemed to have been some place else when murder was going on; at least, he was always able to produce some gangster pal who would swear that Skip had been miles away at the time. Krausmeyer shoved the dope-possessed gangster.

"Easy, snifer," he growled in a voice that sounded like a gear-shift

With a mighty heave, The Whisperer forced the tangle of arms and legs over the edge of the roof.

stripping, "I think this guy's got some things to tell us before he takes a swim with a concrete bathing suit."

Krausmeyer laughed harshly at his own brand of humor. He turned to The Whisperer.

"D'you want to talk now, wise guy? Or will we have to *make* you talk?" His tone plainly indicated that he hoped The Whisperer would choose the latter course. Krausmeyer's sadistic love of torture was well known in the underworld. It was well known to the police, as well, but Skip was careful that witnesses did not live to testify against him.

The Whisperer's greenish eyes glared for a moment at the burly gangster. The eyes seemed to have a luminous quality of their own, surveying Skip without emotion. Then the weird chuckle of The Whisperer drifted again from his lips. Lesser mobbies shuddered at the insolent defiance of a man so thoroughly at the mercy of the sadistic killer.

Krausmeyer snarled in livid rage and stepped quickly toward the bound figure. A long knife came from its sheath. But a smaller thug beside him reached out one hand, tugged at Krausmeyer's elbow.

"Remember what the boss said, Skip. He wants to talk to this bird."

Skip Krausmeyer faltered. He grumbled to himself; but slowly he replaced the knife. Mastiff Grenner did not take kindly to insubordination in his mob. In fact, Mastiff's reputation for reprisal was considerably more terrifying than Krausmeyer's,

"O. K.," he rumbled in his rasping voice. "Let's get goin'. After the boss is through with him, I'll still have my fun."

The mobbies hauled The Whisperer's tightly bound figure to a dingy laundry truck that was parked nearby. It was the type of vehicle that would be entirely unsuspected at this early morning hour. In two hours, now, dawn would break and the laundry truck should be heading out toward its route.

One thug did the driving. The rest, including Skip Krausmeyer, scrambled inside with The Whisperer. As the truck moved noisily away, no one in it noticed the furtive feminine figure that darted from a doorway and slid behind the wheel of a black coupé.

CHAPTER VI.

BLOND INTERFERENCE.

The Whisperer tried to keep track of distance and direction as the laundry truck rumbled through the streets of Manhattan. For a while he was quite successful. He could tell when they turned into Gold Street beside Brooklyn Bridge, by the sound reflection caused by the immense structure.

The truck went across the bridge to Broadway and then turned uptown. The Whisperer was able to keep track of things until they hit the midtown area, which was practically deserted at the early hour before dawn. Then Krausmeyer growled instructions to the driver.

"Mix it up," he grated. "It ain't goin' to make no difference as far as I can see, but the boss said to play it safe."

The truck took a zigzag course, making it impossible for The Whisperer to retain any close idea of their direction. Even though it was apparent that he was not scheduled to live after his interview with Mastiff Grenner, it was apparent that the boss crook was not going to take any chances. That was probably one

reason that Mastiff Grenner had advanced as far in the world of crime as he had.

Another half-hour of twisting and turning elapsed before the truck ground to a stop. Then it backed up noisily. Doors slammed, and The Whisperer was jerked to his feet. When the rear doors of the truck were opened, he was shoved out onto a wooden platform. At the end of the platform there was a small rectangular door. Skip Krausmeyer shoved the prisoner through that into a small elevator cage not much larger than a dumb-waiter. There was just room for Krausmeyer and The Whisperer.

As the cage sank into the ground, the faint rumble of a subway was heard. What subway it might be and at what point on the line, The Whisperer had no possible idea. Skip Krausmeyer was silent as the lift dropped slowly. It went down about twenty-five feet, then bumped to a stop. Another door opened and the crime foe was shoved ahead. The rumble of the subway had become a roar now.

The enigma of the underworld blinked his greenish eyes as he was shoved out of the elevator cage. From the contour of the cavernlike place in which he found himself, he deduced that it was some abandoned subway spur; perhaps a test tunnel that had been bored from the main shaft years before.

And here, it was instantly apparent, Mastiff Grenner dwelt in a security as great as a bombproof shelter. The Whisperer looked down a long furnished apartment. Rugs, ankle-thick, new overstuffed divans, gilt-edged mirrors; even a built-in bar at one side gave indication of the affluence that Mastiff Grenner had managed. His taste in some of the color combinations might well have been questioned, but the trappings needed no price tags to prove that they had been expensive.

The huge form of Mastiff lounged in an overstuffed chair near the far end of the room. The boss crook lunged to his feet, a grin of cruelty on his brutal, doglike face. The opaque agate eyes glittered with hatred.

"Welcome to my apartment," he said with a silky sneer. "I trust we can have a pleasant conversation."

Skip Krausmeyer tripped The Whisperer with one foot and shoved him to the floor. He strode to a rack at one side of the room, studied it for the moment. There was a variety of torture devices there. Skip selected a head screw that was designed to create a pain so excruciating that no one could withstand it. As he walked back to The Whisperer, the small elevator began disgorging the other mobsters who had come in the laundry truck. Krausmeyer looked questioningly at Grenner.

"He'll talk, all right, boss. When do you want me to begin?"

Mastiff Grenner's ugly face was still sneering. He stepped close to The Whisperer.

"It has come to my attention that you know the secret that is so valuable in the laboratories of IPRI," Grenner purred. "You can have your choice of telling it voluntarily or of having your tortured mind shriek it out just to halt the agony you will be knowing."

Grenner scarcely raised his voice. The Whisperer's greenish eyes glowed for a moment. He turned and looked at the half dozen mobsters who stood tensely in a background. The captive shrugged.

"Would you want to share such knowledge with all your mobsters?"

Mastiff straightened. Naturally,

he was not fool enough to think that he could trust all these men to keep a secret valuable enough to make a double cross worth while. He hesitated for just a moment. Then he nodded to Skip Krausmeyer. Apparently he had to have at least one lieutenant he could trust.

"Check his bonds, Skip," Mastiff ordered. Then he told the rest of the men to clear out; to wait on the truck platform. He stood by the elevator door until he heard the last one of the thugs leave the cage above.

Skip Krausmeyer examined the bonds at the wrists of The Whisperer with greatest care. They were firm and had not been tampered with.

Mastiff Grenner padded back toward The Whisperer. Krausmeyer grew a bit overconfident and turned away. After all, he had just examined those tightly stretched ropes. But in that split second of relaxed vigilance, The Whisperer acted!

The tiny, folding razor blade he had taped to one wrist before he left Quick Trigger had come free with one sharp twist of the muscles of the wrist. It cut swiftly into the cords that bound him. The Whisperer had expected capture. He had planned it himself. The shabby man at the bonfire under Brooklyn Bridge had taken to Mastiff Grenner's agents the report that The Whisperer knew the truth of IPRI; that The Whisperer was on the way to the fish-dock hangout. He had wanted to be taken to Mastiff, and capture had seemed the quickest manner of accomplishing that meeting.

The Whisperer lay crouched on the floor. His feet were braced against a massive chair. Hands free, he shot across the room like a black, green-eyed rocket! Mastiff Grenner was still fifteen feet from him. Skip Krausmeyer was half turned away, entirely off guard. The Whisperer struck him in the midriff, sent him spinning. Then the crime foe whirled; compact fists pistoned into Krausmeyer's scarred face. A one-two to the jaw and a right to the stomach sent Skip Krausmeyer to the floor. Swiftly, The Whisperer circled him and dug one slim hand into Skip's right-hand coat pocket. The hand came out with one of his own supersilenced automatics.

Mastiff Grenner had gotten his own gun clear by then. Mastiff blasted with it! But the only result was an ugly gash along Skip Krausmeyer's neck. Then The Whisperer brought up the silenced gun. Lurid blue flame penciled the air with a hiss of warning. The antomatic in Grenner's hand jumped as if it had been snatched away by a hidden wire. It fell to the floor.

Mastiff Grenner's shoulders slumped somewhat as The Whisperer salvaged his other supersilenced pistol from Skip's pocket. The wraithlike battler padded softly toward Grenner. Fear flickered briefly in the dull black eyes. Then Mastiff straightened.

"You can't get out of here," he pointed out. "The mob is assembled up above on the loading platform."

A smile of confidence started to spread over Grenner's lips. But the hissing challenge of the nemesis of crime changed that. Both of the supersilenced pistols were centered on the midriff of the leader.

"You would not be fool enough to bury yourself in a place like this without a secret exit through which you could escape. Turn around and lead the way to it, or I will blow your spine apart!"

Mastiff Grenner shuddered. He knew instantly that The Whisperer would do exactly as he threatened. Grenner was not exactly a coward. But he had no desire to commit suicide at that moment. He tried to counter.

"What do you want to know?" he asked smoothly. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"Who is your boss," The Whisperer demanded. "And how do you get in touch with him. You are not bright enough alone to make sufficient money to build a layout like this."

Grenner choked. His pride was injured.

"Go to hell!" he snarled.

The Whisperer pushed the muzzle of a silenced gun against Mastiff Grenner's spine.

"We will not stall here," he hissed. "Lead immediately to the emergency exit."

Mastiff sensed rather than felt the tightening of the muscles of The Whisperer's gun hand. Quickly, he walked to his massive desk. He pressed a button and the huge piece of furniture swung out from the wall into the room, revealing a narrow concrete stairway that spiraled upward into darkness.

On the still-dark street outside the shabby shack that had served as a subway kiosk, two cars stood in the gloom. The Whisperer swiftly appropriated one of those. A skeleton key opened the lock. Driving with one hand, the other keeping a silenced automatic centered on Mastiff, The Whisperer drove southward. He found that he was on the east side of upper Manhattan, not so very far from the Harlem River where Mulvane's IPRI was located.

Not until The Whisperer had turned onto upper Broadway did the other car parked back in the gloom behind him begin to move. By the time it turned into Broadway, two other cars were between it and the one which The Whisperer was driving.

Traffic was still light. The clock on the dashboard of the car showed that it was only a few minutes past five. There was a frosty grayness in the air. But dawn was still some minutes away.

The Whisperer turned off Broadway not far above Times Square and he tooled his way east till he reached a tall office building. Hissing a warning that made Mastiff Grenner shudder, he got out of the car and jerked his head toward the building entrance.

The night watchman was still on duty there. He nodded at the figure in black.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith," he said. "Kind of chilly, ain't it?"

The Whisperer merely nodded. His hat was pulled well down over his eyes, and he stood so close to Mastiff Grenner that the watchman could not see the supersilenced gun that pressed against the spinal column of the gang boss.

One sleepy elevator operator was on all-night duty. He grunted, only half hearing the directions of The Whisperer. The cage whistled up the shaft to the twenty-third floor of the building.

The frosted-glass door through which The Whisperer shoved his captive bore the lettering:

D. SMITH
PRIVATE

As the door slammed shut behind The Whisperer, Mastiff Grenner began to swing around. He didn't make it. The wraithlike figure moved like a tense steel spring. A quick

jujitsu hold slammed Mastiff Grenner into one corner of the room. In another second, he was tightly bound. The greenish oriental eyes of The Whisperer glittered queerly.

"You have convinced me that you do not know the secret in the plant you ordered sabotaged," he said. "But you are going to tell me exactly how to contact your employer. Through him, I will find out what he is after."

Mastiff Grenner's black eyes flickered with fear. His cruel lips worked strangely, sweat came to his brow.

"I . . . I can't tell you that," he moaned. "I . . . I'd be killed if I did."

A whispering chuckle brought more sweat from Mastiff Grenner's brow. The compact figure in black leaned over him, jerked him to a low bench that was beside the window of the office. The window was an unusually wide pane of glass, nearly six feet from sash to sash. The Whisperer raised the window to the top. Then he lashed Mastiff Grenner firmly to the low bench beside it. He doubled the big man's knees slightly and tied them fast.

Then the ghostly chuckle came again. Suddenly Mastiff Grenner noticed two things. The bench was just a little shorter than the window sill. And it was attached to the sill by a triple set of hinges. Mastiff began to plead with The Whisperer when he heard the hum of the small motor. Slowly, but inexorably, the benchlike slab began to tilt on those hinges!

Sweat poured from the ugly forehead of the gang boss. He pleaded and cursed; then, suddenly, he turned his head to the right. A terrified scream ripped from his lips. He was staring straight down twenty-three stories to the pavement below!

Instinctively, he squirmed. That moved the ropes that held him somewhat. There was an awful, clutching moment. It was undoubtedly Mastiff's imagination that made him think the ropes were slipping. But the fear of death that seems already reaching out is powerful. Mastiff Grenner babbled madly.

"I'll talk! Let me inside again. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

A soft chuckle escaped The Whisperer's lips. But in that instant, there was a sharp blast from a gun. A clear feminine voice cut in.

"No, he won't!" the girl said flatly.

The Whisperer whirled around. There, facing him, was the blonde who had pulled a gun on Edgerton Littleman and who, unknown to him, had been following him for nearly two hours. The black-clad figure moved toward the girl.

The Whisperer staggered, slumped to the floor!

He was only vaguely conscious of the girl's quick step to the window. The reversed motor had brought the window bench back to its normal position, and, helpless, he saw the girl tug at those bonds. Then he was dimly aware of the towering figure of Mastiff Grenner looming above him!

CHAPTER VII.

SLUG'S PRISONER.

Slug Minor did not know anything of the existence of the pretty blonde in the greenish tweed suit. He began to think Quick Trigger had stopped off at a bar when the retired deputy got him on the wire in the offices of IPRI.

"Have I seen a good-looking blonde in a green suit?" Slug gulped. "What the hell do you think this is, a matrimonial agency?"

Then he listened a little more.

JAMES "WILDCAT" GORDON

● Wildcat Gordon, New York's youngest police commissioner, is known for his hard-hitting, unorthodox methods for solving crime. As The Whisperer, there are no rules, no interfering politicians to decree how a case is to be solved and slow the swift path of justice.

"Well, she better not be with Wildcat if Tiny finds out about it."

Slug hung up then. And he was probably correct at that. Tiny Traeger was Quick Trigger's pert brunette daughter. And beneath a perpetual round of surface bickering, she and Wildcat thought a great deal of each other. The whole trouble was that Wildcat considered his career too dangerous and uncertain to ask a woman to share with him. He concealed that beneath a gruff exterior that didn't fool many persons, least of all, Tiny Traeger.

Slug Minor knew that. He turned his bulldog head toward Bolton.

"Did you see a blond frail prowlin' around here?" he asked him. "A bit of pulchritudinous femininity?"

"Huh?" Bolton gulped. Slug's intermittent manipulation of words he didn't understand often threatened to bring Henry's blood pressure to the bursting point.

"A beautiful damsel," Slug explained. "But apparently you didn't. Now stop botherin' me."

Bolton exploded.

"Bother you, you half-human anthropoid! I haven't said a word to you and don't intend to."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Slug rumbled. "You're antisocial."

Slug buried his nose again in a pile of publications he had been reading. They were all back numbers of the monthly intraorganizational magazine that IPRI put out for its own employees. It concentrated mainly on social events of interest to them, production figures and the normal industrial campaign for care and safety to avoid accidents. Slug had marked half a dozen copies. Now, he wrinkled his nose and began to make loud remarks.

"There are eight different bits of attempted sabotage hinted here. And every one of them looks to me like an inside job!"

Henry Bolton's long nose quivered. This was the sort of thing that he did not like. An inside job in a place like the Institute for Physical Research in Industry might involve a lot of toes that were larger than the kind Henry cared to step on. This was distinctly down some-

one else's alley as far as Henry was concerned.

"You'd better be careful," he complained nasally. "There's a lot of money behind this place."

Slug grunted in annoyance.

"Why don't you stop being an insect?" he demanded.

That threatened to start an extended argument between the two. But a door from the directors' room opened at that moment and Andre Selm trod into the room, giving somewhat the impression of a worried ghost walking on eggs. His dark, staring eyes seemed to be still trying to comprehend something that escaped him. Slug jumped him right away.

"Look here, Mr. Selm," he rumbled, "there's an inside job of sabotage been goin' on in this plant. Some bird inside here has to be behind it. These things were too well timed to be accidents."

Selm nodded. His hollow voice sounded more mournful and despairing than ever.

"Yes, you may be right," he agreed.

His tone indicated that there wasn't anything that he could think of to do about it. Selm was not what could be termed a forceful character. Slug pressed him.

"Now, what is it around this joint that's so damned valuable?" he rumbled. "I'm goin' to find out if I—"

Henry Bolton began to splutter indignantly. His voice rose to a whining screech as he jumped in front of Slug. There was very little love lost between Slug and Henry.

"You can't talk to a citizen like that, Slug!" he yelped. "I'll have you put back in harness. I'll—"

The second interruption was the muted buzzing of a phone bell. Selm scooped up the instrument. Instantly, he began to dart furtive glances at the two policemen.

"I . . . this is, Av—" His skinny face was growing red. "J-j-just tell me about it as it happened."

Andre Selm listened. His haggard eyes began to grow wide. An expression that had not been in them before became predominant. It was a stark, surprised terror. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"An ordinary crook?" he gasped. "It c-c-can't be, I'm sure—" His voice changed then. "Accept that offer you got yesterday— Yes, don't fail to do it. I'll be depending on it— Yes, I'll have things to do! Hurry, now!"

Slug Minor chewed noisily on a stick of gum as he watched Selm.

"Double talk, eh," he grumbled when the gaunt man had pronged the receiver of the phone. "Now, suppose you tell us what that was all about and what's bein' concealed around this joint. I'm fed up with bein' shoved around here."

Slug rolled toward Andre Selm like some huge trained gorilla who had suddenly ceased being amiable. Selm cringed back toward the wall as Slug loomed menacingly over him.

"Come on," he growled. "Do some talkin' or I'll take you down to headquarters."

A door slammed then and the bellowing voice of Joseph Bren Mulvane filled the room.

"Stop bullying Selm," he roared. "There are plenty of other things to be done, and if you don't quit pestering Andre I'll report you to the commissioner."

Bolton whinnied like a happy horse.

"That's what I've been tellin' the big idiot," he yelped. "Now, maybe he'll get some sense."

Slug turned on Mulvane.

"How about *you* tellin' me what's goin' on around here?" he growled. "You haven't been too helpful."

Mulvane opened his mouth. He closed it again but nothing came out. He suddenly realized that he wasn't as indignant as he had thought he was. His face turned a little pinkish. Then, with a toss of his leonine gray hair, he found his voice.

"Come, Andre. We will retire to my apartment."

Andre Selm coughed hollowly.

"I . . . I must go downtown," he said. "I have an early appointment today."

Joseph Mulvane and his senior associate stalked from the big room and left the building by the front entrance.

Slug looked at Bolton.

"Let's beat it, Henry," he grunted, and started toward the rear door while Bolton glared at him.

Slug pulled the door suddenly to him. He was immediately bowled over in an involuntary flying tackle executed by Edgerton Littleman. Despite his own weight, Slug sat down with a loud *Oooof!* Littleman had obviously been eavesdropping when Slug had opened the door unexpectedly.

Slug struggled to his feet. The fact that Bolton was snickering loudly did not in any way decrease the burly cop's wrath. Without a word, he slipped out handcuffs and snapped them on Edgerton Littleman's wrists.

"I don't give a damn what anybody says," Slug grunted, "you're comin' to headquarters with me. Someone around here's goin' to talk."

By that time, Littleman had recovered his normal sarcastic composure. The corners of his mobile mouth turned down with sardonic amusement.

"And just how do you think you're going to make me talk, Gargantua?" he said in his flat, emotionless voice. "If you charge me with anything I'll get you for false arrest. And if you don't you'll have to turn me loose in forty-eight hours. I can keep quiet that long."

Bolton's long nose quivered in renewed fear. Slug Minor's heavy face got redder than it had been.

"Oh, a wise guy, are you?" he grunted. "And you're goin' to tell me my business. Well, we'll go down to talk to Wildcat, anyway. Sometimes he don't like wise guys."

Slug glared at the long-nosed deputy commissioner.

"And another thing he don't like is your snivelin' about pinchin' somebody too high up in the big-shot list."

Bolton subsided as Slug led the way to the departmental car. They swung out and headed for headquarters. By now, dawn had long been an accomplished fact. The early-morning traffic was already thick, as office workers struggled jobward.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TRIP FOR TINY.

The most surprising thing to The Whisperer when he regained consciousness was that he was still alive. Mastiff Grenner, of course, was gone. He had expected that. The bonds that had held him were cleanly cut. And the pretty blonde in the green tweed suit who had cut them was also gone. And that was no surprise.

One thing was certain. The decision that had permitted the long arm of justice to remain among the living had not been Mastiff Grenner's. There was little question that

the dog-faced master crook would have taken the greatest possible pleasure in permanently removing The Whisperer from his list of foes.

Therefore, the problem was susceptible of but one solution. The girl must have prevented Mastiff from carrying out the most natural gesture in the world for an underworld kingpin. The girl had first shot at The Whisperer. He was certain, now, that she had not even intended to hit him. He had been moving fast when she pulled that trigger. Who the girl was and what her role was in the queer mystery of the IPRI sabotage and murder, The Whisperer did not know.

Mastiff Grenner had been able to give him little information. Mastiff himself did not know what invaluable secret was hidden behind the barbed wire of IPRI's laboratories. Nor did he know the identity of the evil genius who employed him. A soft chuckle escaped from the lips of the wraithlike fighter as he struggled to his feet. He padded to a washstand and wiped dried blood from the bullet crease at his temple.

He tried to figure why the mysterious blond girl would take such desperate measures to prevent The Whisperer from talking to Mastiff Grenner. If Mastiff did not know the name of his employer or what was behind this play, what else could he tell that could be so dangerous? The Whisperer did not know.

He would also have liked to know whether Mulvane or Littleman had dropped that pamphlet, advertising Taw Hayshker and the Hoe and Plow for America, in the corridor of IPRI. The long arm of justice did not know what connection, if indeed, any, that Hoe and Plow had in this thing. But Taw Hayshker at the moment seemed the only point of contact that was worthwhile following.

With a whispering chuckle of determination, the Whisperer left the building. As he hobbled through the now crowded lobby on the main floor his clothing again seemed ill-fitting. Dunk Smith seemed to shrink within his garments and became nondescript and shabby. The car he had borrowed earlier in the morning was not in sight. The Whisperer had carefully parked it beside a fire plug, to be sure it would attract the attention of a traffic cop and result in a quicker return to its rightful owner.

The crime fighter hailed a cab. He gave an address that was close to police headquarters. The Whisperer maintained a secret hide-out there. He entered the building from a side street. But the windows of one room looked straight out at police headquarters and, in fact, into the windows of the office of Commissioner Wildcat Gordon.

It was to that hide-out that The Whisperer went, now. There, he used a phone and called one of the underworld agents who contributed to the amazing amount of grapevine information that The Whisperer had at his command. Some of those agents were crooks who had reformed and who realized that The Whisperer was the one potent and unencumbered source of justice. Still others were stoolies who had grudges against killers in the underworld. For one reason or another, the black-clad scrapper who was feared wherever crime trod commanded a formidable army of information gatherers. He instructed the agent on the wire to pick up a black coupé parked near Brooklyn Bridge and bring it to a garage near the hide-out.

Then The Whisperer threw off

the black clothing and removed the greenish contact lenses.

A few seconds later, the brisk, correctly-garbed figure of Wildcat Gordon strode from another entrance out into the cool morning air. He crossed the street with a springy step and trod lightly up the steps into headquarters. He paused for a moment at the main desk.

"I have information that Mastiff Grenner is maintaining two hide-outs," he told the lieutenant there. "I want them both raided immediately and everything in them confiscated."

Wildcat gave the addresses of the Brooklyn hide-out and directions on how to find the old converted subway tunnel, far uptown. Then he went down the corridor toward his own office.

Before he reached his office, Wildcat encountered the one person in the world from whom he would run in a quarrel. She was a petite girl as pretty as any man should want. She smiled when she saw Wildcat and stepped quickly to him. One trim gloved hand touched the arm of the commissioner.

"G'-by, Wildcat," the girl said. "I'm off for sunny Florida. Wish me bon voyage."

The girl was Tiny Traeger. Her eyes were large and expressive as she smiled at Wildcat. It was her eyes that gave him the greatest amount of trouble.

Sometimes he would have sworn they were blue. At other times they were gray, like the sea before a storm. There were other times when they seemed violet; and those were the times when Wildcat had the greatest difficulty in remembering that he had too hazardous a profession to be shared with a woman, even as lovely a one as Tiny Traeger. He pressed her hand now and smiled a good-by to her. He had known she was planning this trip. She was supposed to go with some school chum; but when he had last talked to her, Tiny was going alone.

"Will you please tell dad that I've left a message for him on his desk," the trim girl asked. "I'll be seeing both of you soon. Luck."

She leaned forward quickly and her lips touched Wildcat lightly on one leathery cheek. It was a light touch, but for some reason he felt as though it burned. Wildcat waved as she went out of the door. Then he turned back to his office. The first thing he had in mind to do was to get in touch with Taw Hayshker and ask the tall, skinny back-to-the-soil leader to come into headquarters for a talk.

When he turned into the outer reception office, the first thing Wildcat saw was a pair of high-top, hook-laced shoes on a desk. The shoes seemed to be attached to a pair of rough, homespun pants. The pants were held up by a pair of red suspenders over a hickory shirt. There sat Taw Hayshker, a long, wispy straw dangling from his teeth.

He untangled himself with some apparent difficulty as Wildcat came in, stood up and pulled the straw from his mouth.

"Been awaitin' to see yuh, commissioner," his thin, reedy voice informed Wildcat.

Wildcat skidded to a stop. The coincidence nearly upset him. And there was something about it that suddenly made him fear that his investigations in this direction were not, immediately, at least, going to bear enough fruit to make picking particularly worth while. Hayshker stood before him, a sort of ex-

pectant expression on his craggy face.

"I've been wanting to see you, too," Wildcat clipped. He swept on into his office, followed by the gangling visitor.

"I've gone an' rented me a hall in New York fer t'night," Hayshker twanged. "Figger I might as well bring my message right on into the big place."

It was perhaps characteristic of the man that he assumed without introduction that Wildcat would know who he was and what meeting he was talking about. Wildcat accepted it on that basis.

"What do you know about Maynard Nicholson's background?" Wildcat asked as soon as the door had closed.

If the sudden question surprised or concerned Hayshker, he didn't show it. He chewed thoughtfully on his straw for a moment, his blue eyes staring at the wall across the room from him.

"Said he was somethin' or other in a firm that went broke," Hayshker said thinly. "'Pears that was the thing that made him come to thinkin' city life wasn't so good."

Wildcat's cold blue eyes were like twin gimlets. He was scrutinizing every change of expression that came over Taw Hayshker's face.

"Do you have any idea why he was killed?" Wildcat shot at him.

Hayshker looked puzzled at the question.

"Could've been somethin' he done afore he come to the Hoe and Plow," he said. "Wasn't nothin' wrong with him while he was with us."

A faint crease wrinkled Wildcat's brow. He dropped the murder of Maynard Nicholson.

"Why did you want to see me?" he inquired.

"You're police commissioner," Hayshker stated simply. "I don't want no murder at my new hall. So I come to yuh."

All of which was logical. Wildcat nodded in agreement, took down the address of the new meeting hall of the Hoe and Plow for America and ushered Taw Hayshker out of the door. As the gangling bumpkin sauntered out, Slug Minor and Bolton loomed in the corridor with the manacled form of Edgerton Littleman between them.

The ex-grid star's mouth was still twisted with sardonic humor. He seemed entirely unworried about his predicament as he glared at Wildcat, a trace of a sneer in his eyes.

"This is the first time," he said, jerking his head toward Slug Minor, "that I was ever questioned by a menagerie. It'll also probably be the first time that I ever brought a false-arrest suit against a gorilla."

Wildcat's blue eyes were as hard as bits of ice. He motioned toward a chair and Edgerton Littleman sank into it. The manacles were still on his hands, and he held up his wrists in suggestion that Wildcat might want to release them; but the young commissioner ignored the gesture.

Wildcat was silent for a moment, pacing up and down before the big leather chair in which Littleman was sitting. Suddenly he whipped around.

"Your blond girl friend was reported in the hands of Mastiff Grenner, one of the toughest gangsters in the city," he snapped. "We don't know where they went. But she was with him less than two hours ago."

Edgerton Littleman came to his feet as if he were controlled by a spring. His wide mouth lost the expression of irony. Unmistakable

fear glowed dully in his eyes.

"We've got to do something!" he blurted. "We've got to get her away from that killer!"

"Oh, so you *know* Mastiff Grenner, do you?" Wildcat bored in. "And now you admit knowing that pretty blonde, quite well, apparently."

Edgerton Littleman's face went a fiery red. He stepped forward menacingly, brought his hands up as if to strike Wildcat with the cuffs. Slug moved in to intervene, but Wildcat waved him back. The square-jawed commissioner took a master key from one pocket and unsnapped the cuffs. Then he stepped back, a hard smile on his lips.

"O. K., step right in," Wildcat rapped. "You have an exaggerated opinion of yourself and your importance. If you want to press it, go ahead."

Littleman faltered and Wildcat went on with his questioning.

"I want to know who that girl is and how she is mixed up in this murder mob," he barked. "I want you to tell me that, or I'll throw you into a cell."

Edgerton Littleman sank wearily back into the leather chair. He put his head in his hands. There was nothing sardonic about his tone this time. He shook his head as if it pained him mightily.

"I can't tell you," he moaned. "Lock me up if you want to. But right now, I'm not talking. Later, maybe. But not now."

Wildcat jerked one thumb at Henry Bolton.

"Take him into the detention room," he ordered. "I may want to talk to him later."

Littleman went out with Henry.

*

As soon as the door had closed, Slug began to tell Wildcat about Andre Selm's queer telephone conversation in the IPRI office.

"He said something about an ordinary crook and that it couldn't be," Slug told him. "Then he told whoever was calling to accept an offer he got yesterday and not fail to do it."

"He?" Wildcat asked. "How do you know?"

Slug shrugged.

"I don't," he admitted. "I just assumed it was a he."

"How did he react when you called him on it?" Wildcat wanted to know.

Slug grunted in disgust.

"Scared to death," he said.

Wildcat permitted a low whistle to come from his lips. He walked around the room, hands behind his back. Then he faced Slug once more.

"Selm knows something he won't tell," he said. "And he is afraid of it. Littleman is afraid of something he knows, and he won't talk, either. We can say the same thing about Mulvane. They're all scared and they're all lying."

Slug Minor sighed.

"Ain't it the truth," he groaned. "It don't make sense and it don't get us any place. It—"

The door to the outer office opened, and Quick Trigger loomed there. The old deputy was more excited than Wildcat had seen him in quite some time. He was waving a sheet of paper in one hand. It developed that it was the message Tiny had left for him. He handed it to Wildcat. The young commissioner read the words, an increasing frown on his brow.

Avis Selm, my chum from school, has decided suddenly to take the Florida trip with me. We are sailing at 10:00 on the *Southern Wave*. Sorry to have missed you; wanted to see you before I sailed. Will be back in three weeks. TINY.

Wildcat turned slowly on his heel. His eyes were hard and tense.

"Avis Selm," he said slowly. "A sudden decision to sail with Tiny. Quick, let's get to that pier!"

Wildcat barked questions into his phone; found that the *Southern Wave* was leaving from a midtown pier that was at least twenty minutes away by car. A wall clock showed 9:45. But it is a known fact that most ships are a little late in sailing. Wildcat depended on that. He raced to the door, followed by old Quick and Slug Minor.

"Maybe it's only a hunch," Wildcat snapped. "But there's plenty of danger on that boat. I'm afraid Tiny'll be caught up in it if what I think is true."

Slug Minor had the big police sedan in motion almost before his two passengers were in it. The burly cop had been a truck driver and longshoreman before Wildcat, at the time a detective, had rescued him from a robbery frame-up and placed him on the force. As the machine plunged forward, Quick spoke to Wildcat.

"Our routine check-up showed that Andre Selm has a daughter named Avis," he rumbled, "but it did not indicate that she was in the city. I've scarcely seen Tiny in the last week and probably wouldn't have questioned her about whom she was going with, anyway."

Wildcat nodded, recalling Slug's report of Andre Selm's conversation on the telephone.

"Selm must have wanted to get her out of danger," Quick rumbled.

Wildcat's blue eyes glittered icily. His words were brittle with worry and anger.

"Unless she's being used as a decoy to lead Tiny into a spot where pressure can be put on us," he suggested.

Both men were silent, then. Rubber screamed as Slug put the heavy sedan around corners with breath-taking speed. The siren wailed a banshee warning to other motorists. Slug made West Street in exactly eight minutes from headquarters. Then he headed north and ran into a snarl at Fourteenth Street. That held him up a little.

Slug loosed a string of words that shocked a taxi driver next to him and wormed his way clear. Then he gave the sedan all she had and slammed to a stop outside the pier offices at exactly 10:01. The three men leaped from the car, pounded past the offices and raced out onto the dock. The *Southern Wave* was there, clear of the slip and nearly squared around in the stream.

The ship was a small cabin-class coastal liner. Only two tugs had been needed to help her from her berth. As Wildcat, Quick and Slug watched her, the second tug let go. The main deck was lined with south-going passengers, waving hands, hats and handkerchiefs. Ribbons of confetti looked like macaroni spilled over the top of a boiling black pot. Midway on the deck, Wildcat saw two dainty figures. One of them was unmistakably Tiny Traeger. And the girl beside her was also quite familiar to the commissioner.

She no longer wore the suit of greenish tweed. And her face was not now contorted with strong emotion. But Avis Selm was undoubtedly the blonde who had pulled a gun on Edgerton Littleman the night before and the one whose bullet had creased the skull of The Whisperer!

Wildcat whirled around.

"Harbor precinct," he rapped.

"We'll intercept the boat and take them off."

He plunged toward the street and nearly bowled over a uniformed motorcycle cop who was coming in. The cop saluted respectfully, then handed Wildcat an envelope.

"Message for you, sir," he said. "It was brought by a messenger who said it was important. Central switchboard said you'd probably be at this pier."

Wildcat scarcely paused as he ripped the message open. Then his jaw sagged just a bit. He handed the sheet of paper to old Quick Trigger. The words, addressed to Wildcat, were written in neat longhand:

Dear commissioner: I have sent my daughter to a place of temporary safety so that I may be free to act. Things have come to my attention today that will bring about a showdown in certain matters that have interested you. I will get in touch with you shortly.

Sincerely, Andre Selm.

For a moment, Wildcat seemed to hesitate on the course of action. Quick Trigger's heavy brows raised slightly as he read the message. He cleared his throat.

"They're both probably safer on the boat than they would be in New York," he rumbled. "By now, Tiny would be suspected of knowing too much for her own good just because of her association with the other girl."

Wildcat was silent. Right then, his main concern was the continued safety of Tiny Traeger. The mystery in New York, he felt that he could unsnarl. Quick's words decided him. He recalled that not so long ago Tiny *had* been kidnaped right from the penthouse in which she lived with her father because she knew too much.

"Let them go," he rapped finally. "We'll push the job from this end."

Thin partitions often separate various phases of life; sometimes even life from death. The quiet conference with Quick Trigger turned Wildcat's back to the offices on the dock. And he had no reason to turn around for another look. He walked straight to the waiting police sedan.

In so doing, he missed the two late passengers who were negotiating for a speed launch to overtake the *Southern Wave*. One of them was huge, evil-looking Skip Krausmeyer, the killer whom The Whisperer had knocked out in the uptown subway headquarters of Mastiff Grenner!

CHAPTER IX.

NEW DEFIANCE.

Wildcat got out of the car at headquarters. There were a couple of things he wanted to do as Wildcat Gordon. Then, he knew, The Whisperer would have to step in to get some needed information. First, Wildcat strode into his offices and called Henry Bolton. The long-nosed deputy came out of the inner room, stood for a moment in the open door. Behind him, Wildcat could see Edgerton Littleman sitting on a wooden bench.

"Bring him in," Wildcat said.

Bolton motioned to Littleman. The big ex-football player sauntered in as if he were entering a matinee. The sneer was back on his face and it was coupled now with a new defiance. Wildcat's appraisal was swift and accurate.

"Anything happen while I was gone, Henry? Anyone come to see this fellow?"

Bolton rubbed his long nose uncomfortably. He glanced at Littleman.

"No," he replied. "Nothing happened. I let him make a phone call."

Wildcat's interest quickened.

"To whom and from what phone did he make it?"

Bolton looked uncomfortable. And he was. Apparently, he'd been talked into what he had done.

"I let him make it from the outside booth," he admitted. "I don't know who he called."

Wildcat Gordon looked thoughtfully across the wide floor to the door that led to the outer corridor where the booth was located. Near the door was a white slip of paper on the floor. Quickly he strode toward it.

"Who did you call?" he demanded.

Whatever fear Littleman might have felt before seemed to have evaporated.

"I'm not charged with anything and my private affairs are none of your business," he said flatly.

Wildcat's manner changed as he recognized the slip of paper on the floor. It was the note from Tiny Traeger to Quick, telling him that she and Avis Selm were sailing on the *Southern Wave*. Apparently, Wildcat had dropped the note as he had rushed out with Quick Trigger and Slug.

"Did you see this?" he demanded.

Littleman's smile was almost tolerant. He seemed to feel mighty sure of himself.

"Sure, I saw it," he said. "What are you going to do about it? I'm demanding right now that you either book me for some crime or turn me loose. I made two calls while I was in that phone booth. One of them was to a lawyer."

For a moment it seemed that Wildcat Gordon was going to really explode. Quick Trigger moved instinctively in to intercept him. He'd seen Wildcat really let go in the past. Color flooded the youthful commissioner's face; his blue eyes seemed to smolder with living fire as he stepped toward the ex-grid star.

Edgerton Littleman suddenly felt himself gripped by two compact hands that were like steel traps. An expression of amazement crossed his face. Littleman was noted for his strength. But he found that he couldn't move. Then Wildcat eased his grip. The muscles of his face relaxed and his shoulders drooped. He let Littleman go.

"O. K., you win," he admitted. "If you've called a lawyer, there is nothing I can do to stop a habeas-corpus writ to get you out."

Littleman straightened his rumpled clothes. There was a tiny bit of awe in his expression as he went out the door. The instant the door was closed, the attitude of dejection dropped from Wildcat like a cast-off garment. He leaped to the phone, gave quick orders to the lieutenant at the main desk. He described Edgerton Littleman exactly.

"He just left my office," Wildcat snapped. "Put your best tail on him and keep him there. I want a complete report, and I don't want him to know he's being followed."

Wildcat clicked the receiver and called the police switchboard.

"Confidential alarm to all detectives," he barked. "I want Andre Selm picked up and brought in for questioning. No rough stuff, but I want him."

Wildcat gave a description of Selm. Then he hung up and turned to Quick Trigger. He looked worriedly at the note from Tiny.

"I don't like this at all," he said. "I'd feel a lot better if no one but ourselves knew those girls were aboard the *Southern Wave*."

Quick Trigger squinted at him.

"The Selm girl's father would

naturally know, anyway," he pointed out.

Wildcat nodded.

"But I wouldn't *think* he'd bring harm to his own daughter."

Quick Trigger grunted and started to say something, but the phone bell interrupted him. Quick answered, then handed the instrument to Wildcat.

"For you," he rumbled.

The voice on the other end was that of Joseph Bren Mulvane. The industrialist sounded weary and tired. He was neither defiant nor mysterious.

"Selm is missing," he told Wildcat. "I can't locate him. He was the only one I could really trust."

Wildcat made no comment. Mulvane had wanted to talk or he would not have called.

"I . . . I guess I'd better talk," Mulvane stammered. "But this is too big to be discussed over the telephone. Can you come up to the laboratory?"

Wildcat said he could. The receiver clicked, and he turned to the three men in the room.

"Slug will drive me," he told Quick Trigger. "You stay here with Bolton and take the reports from Littleman's tail. If the boys should get Selm, bring him in here and let him wait."

Wildcat stepped swiftly toward the door. It seemed that some real information that might point to a solution of the mess was now at hand. Mulvane had decided to come clean with some information.

As Wildcat passed the central desk, the lieutenant had one report for him. Both of Mastiff Grenner's hide-outs had been raided. There wasn't a single mobster in either of them. Both had been hurriedly evacuated.

"Someone must have tipped him that you'd gotten the information on them," the lieutenant suggested. Wildcat nodded and went out of the door. Slug Minor was already behind the wheel.

It was well after noon by then. Traffic was heavy and Slug could not make anything like the speed he had made earlier in the day. It seemed to take ages to get up to the Harlem River industrial area. Slug breathed a sigh of relief as the high corrugated-iron and barbed-wire fences of the IPRI plant loomed ahead of them. There was one corner to turn that would bring them to the main gate. Slug gave the car a burst of speed and started to swing around the corner. In that instant, two things happened quickly.

A Tommy-gun chattered from a concealed ambush in a ramshackle brick building at the corner! Spidery blotches stitched across the windshield and the window beside Wildcat. Both were bulletproof. The glass fractured but did not shatter. The Tommy-gun assault instantly took their combined attention. Wildcat rolled the window down enough to get the muzzle of a Police Positive into action.

Slug put on the brakes and twisted the wheel. He shot the heavy car past the narrow crevice between two buildings where he thought the machine gunners was crouching.

And then the truck bore down on the police machine!

It was a huge brewery truck loaded to the guards with barrels of beer. There was a sickening crash as the Gargantuan machine plowed into the sedan, shoving it over on a forty-degree angle. Bulletproof steel gave under the tremendous impact. Two dim figures could be seen to leap from the cab of the truck. Then red flames licked

up from the engine hood! Black smoke obliterated the surroundings for Wildcat and Slug Minor.

Slug lunged against the door. It was frozen tight by the twisted steel. The doors on Wildcat's side were also frozen. The flames of the truck leaped higher, licking over the hood of the sedan!

"There's an emergency gas tank under the hood," Slug reminded Wildcat. "If that goes up, it'll be fun."

Slug meshed the gears, tried slow ahead and reverse. The prow of the big truck was buried in the side of the sedan like battering-ram. Rubber skidded on the pavement under the powerful thrust of the wheels. But the sedan didn't move. Slug Minor growled in rage; he fought with gearshift and throttle.

While he was doing that, Wildcat swiftly tore up the floor boards of the machine, opening the only exit that existed for them. Wildcat wriggled through. He could just make it. Slug Minor didn't have a chance with his huge bulk.

Wildcat raced around the hood of the sedan and dived into the cab of the big truck. He kicked the starter and hoped. The truck motor backfired, then burst into life. The flames had not yet ruined the working parts. Wildcat slammed the truck into reverse. It shuddered, came back away from the police sedan. It came back a dozen feet; then the motor coughed and died, too scored by heat to move farther.

Released from the pressure of the big truck, the sedan settled back on all four wheels. Slug managed one door then and climbed out beside Wildcat.

"Mulvane, the rat," Slug growled. "He decoyed us up here to get you off the case."

Wildcat shook his head.

"It hardly seems he would do that with an open call to headquarters that would point to him right away."

Slug grunted.

"He's smart. He knows that he could use that as a defense. When we go in, he'll be horrified about it. I'll bet he will."

Slug was still muttering as he followed Wildcat on foot through the gate and into the administration building of the plant.

By that time the fire department had answered the call to extinguish the blaze in the truck.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE TABLEAU.

Slug Minor would have lost his cash bet on Mulvane's reaction to the attempted murder of Wildcat Gordon and himself. Mulvane was not horrified that his "innocent" phone call had nearly brought death to them. Mulvane wasn't even in the plant!

The industrialist's secretary was quite disturbed about it. She was a prim young woman with horn-rimmed glasses and a school-teacherish appearance. She discovered that Mulvane was gone when she went inside to announce Wildcat and Slug. She knew they were expected. Several people knew that, she said; it was scarcely a secret.

"Yeah," Slug muttered. "I told you. More alibis."

But then the secretary came back. She look mystified.

"H-he seems to be gone," she said with a note of surprise. "And this is the only exit from his office, except the window."

She looked at Wildcat, her eyes wide behind the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"He didn't come out this way," she

said definitely. "And—well, I wouldn't think Mr. Mulvane would go out a window."

Her tone seemed to indicate that he therefore must still be in there. Wildcat strode past her into the well-furnished office of Joseph Mulvane. One window was open all the way to the top. Wildcat walked to that and leaned over the sill.

"What color suit did Mulvane have on today?" he asked.

The girl thought a minute.

"Brown," she said.

Wildcat grunted and held up a bit of lint. It was brown!

"He went out the window all right," Wildcat said.

He tucked the piece of lint into one vest pocket. But what he did not show the secretary was another grayish bit of lint that he had also found on the rough-brick window sill. He tucked that into a separate pocket and then turned to the girl.

"Is there any signal that will bring about an immediate general assembly of the plant?" he inquired.

The girl nodded; she pointed to a button marked: FIRE DRILL. Wildcat looked at a wall clock. It was ten minutes past two. He snapped quick orders to the girl.

"Call the guards at all gates, tell them to let no one in or out. Then push the fire-drill button. I want an immediate roll call."

The girl seemed bewildered. But she swiftly followed instructions to the letter. The alarm button set off a screaming siren. Wildcat gave Slug Minor instructions, then turned to the girl and asked her to accompany him on the inspection tour.

As they left the office, she told him that every employee in the plant had an assigned fire station, much like regulations at sea on passenger ships. That had been done, she explained, because of the highly inflammable nature of many of IPRI's experiments. Each fire station was composed of the personnel of a single working section of the plant.

Wildcat strode through the fire lines, giving each department head a single order: to inspect all of his men and ascertain if everyone who had reported for work that morning was still present. He had already found out that everyone ate lunch in the plant.

He struck no oil until he came to a hose-line station commanded by the head of the accounting department. The chief accountant scratched his head.

"No," he told Wildcat, "we're one short. Rockwell Glimp went home with a headache about half an hour ago."

"How was he dressed?" Wildcat asked.

"Gee," he complained, "I hardly noticed, but"—the chief accountant scratched his head again—"yeah, he had on a gray suit."

Wildcat began to whistle softly. He told the secretary that he was finished with the fire drill; then, taking the chief accountant with him, he asked to be shown the location of Rockwell Glimp's desk. He found that the missing man had a desk in a private alcove. The window of the alcove was in a corner of the building, and it was possible to step from the sill of that to the window sill of Joseph Mulvane's private office!

Wildcat asked the chief accountant several questions; then he returned to the outer office where Slug sat admiring the secretary. She went out as Wildcat came in.

"Gee!" Slug observed. "Without them glasses, she'd be a knockout." Then he remembered Wildcat's instructions. "You were right," he said. "The brewery truck was re-

ported stolen twenty minutes before we got here."

Wildcat swung toward the phone.

"Everything seems to have started with Mulvane's phone call to me," he snapped. "That was forty-five minutes ago. Fifteen minutes later an employee in the adjoining office, who could easily have heard the call, reports sick and disappears. Next, a brewery truck is stolen and is used to ram us."

Wildcat dialed police headquarters. He put out a general alarm for the arrest of Rockwell Glimp.

"Tall, long-nosed, sallow-complexioned and wearing a gray suit," he told the teletype operator. "May be found in company with any member of Mastiff Grenner's gang. Watch those hangouts particularly."

Wildcat hung up. Slug began to stammer protests and questions, but Wildcat shut him up.

"Back to headquarters, fast," he snapped.

The police car was battered, but it was still able to function. As Slug pushed through traffic, Wildcat used the two-way short-wave radio to talk to the detective bureau. He asked for a report on the shadowing of Edgerton Littleman. He was told that the big ex-football player was pacing up and down in front of a big store on the lower East Side that had just been rented. A man had just finished lettering the window. The inscription was:

HOE and PLOW for AMERICA
Taw Hayshker, President

Wildcat Gordon laughed harshly. As Slug swung the big sedan into Centre Street, Wildcat told him to stop. The young commissioner got out.

"Go up to my offices and wait for instructions," he rasped. "Tell Quick and Bolton I want them to wait, too."

Slug shook his head. It didn't make sense to him that Wildcat should go off alone, then. But Slug was used to taking orders. He pulled the car to the curb and watched his chief disappear around a corner. The thought that Wildcat Gordon might be The Whisperer never entered Slug Minor's head. Not that it would have made a bit of difference to him; Slug was for Wildcat in any form.

And he also had a grudging admiration for some of the things The Whisperer had done.

It was not The Whisperer known to the underworld that padded softly up to the entrance of the new quarters of Taw Hayshker's organization. The black clothing was wrinkled and shabby, and, again, the oddly-pointed chin was tucked into the upturned collar of the coat. Dunk Smith, harmless and no-account, was the known name of the dim figure that padded down the East Side.

The Whisperer knew that Mastiff Grenner might have caught the connection between the two when Avis Selm had freed him from the midtown hide-out of Dunk Smith. But even if Mastiff Grenner had noticed that, he doubted that the boss crook would let anyone else in on such valuable information.

And on that gamble, The Whisperer went into the hall of the Hoe and Plow for America. It was late afternoon by the time he had gotten all the way down to the newly rented store. An afternoon meeting of Hayshker's back-to-the-soil movement had been scheduled to open the new quarters.

As Dunk Smith hobbled in, he noticed the two husky detectives stand-

ing across the street in a dim doorway. Those had been instructions. The detectives were not to enter the hall. In case The Whisperer found a battle on his hands, he didn't want to be encumbered by trying to dodge police slugs that he couldn't return.

The hall was about half full when The Whisperer went in. Taw Hayshker was standing on the rostrum, talking in his nasal, backwoods twang. Edgerton Littleman stood near the speaker. Littleman looked nervous, now, for some reason. He scarcely seemed to hear what Hayshker was saying.

"Jes' take a look at this here city suicide rate," the tall, skinny leader twanged. "People live too carn-sarned fast in the cities. Some of 'em goes out 'cause their livers won't stand the pace. And in some it's the mind that goes. That's the reason for the suicides. There ain't much profit in that. An' people who keep holdin' up that glitterin' profit oughta be discouraged."

Taw Hayshker paused now and then to look down at his audience. For all his ungrammatical backwoods phraseology, Hayshker had something. Despite the nasal twanging of his voice, he possessed a sort of hypnotic power. It was the same sort of power that itinerant evangelists had used for generations to bring revival meetings to a fever-pitch exhuberance.

Suddenly, Taw Hayshker looked from the improvised pulpit and paused. There was a rustling of clothing from the rear of the hall. The Whisperer turned his head with many others.

Striding down the aisle, a veritable ghost of a man, came Andre Selm. His thin face seemed more gaunt than ever; his eyes were wide. His broad forehead glistened with sweat. Andre Selm's body swayed slightly as he stepped toward the rostrum. But his step was firm with a strange determination.

Probably no one in the hall could have told exactly why, but an atmosphere of tension built up like electric power in a step-up coil.

The room became strangely silent. Selm's eyes glowed with a sort of dark fire as he stepped swiftly across the rostrum. Taw Hayshker bowed in acknowledgment of his visit. It could be noticed that Littleman dropped his eyes as Andre passed. Quite apparently, the ex-grid star could not meet the gaunt man's gaze.

Andre Selm hesitated for a moment at the pulpit. His eyes seemed to falter. Then, face flushed with rage, he turned on Edgerton Littleman. Selm whipped a small automatic out of one pocket and pointed it toward the larger man!

But by that time Dunk Smith was moving like a black projectile across the dingy room. Just as the gun in Selm's hand blasted, he crashed into the frail body of the man. Selm cursed bitterly. He fell to the floor, losing his grip on the gun.

The room was in a pandemonium of chaos. Selm scrambled to his feet, wormed his way through the crowd.

At the sound of the shots, the two detectives from across the street plunged into the room at the exact moment in which Dunk Smith arose from a tangled mass of humanity. Taw Hayshker was helping him to his feet. And in that instant a yell went up from the crowd. No one had noticed who the dim figure was that flung itself at Andre Selm.

But as the figure emerged, now, the black clothing looked no longer wrinkled and ill-fitting. And the long, pointed chin showed clearly in the dim lighting of the big room. Slanted, greenish eyes glowed

fiercely for a moment.

"The Whisperer!" someone yelled.

The two detectives were through the door by then.

"Get him!"

But that proved difficult. Twin oversized pistols seemed to leap into the hands of The Whisperer. They hissed softly twice. There was no thud of lead into flesh. But the only two lights in the place smashed with sharp reports of their own. The place was plunged into a deep gloom so close to actual darkness that no features could be recognized at any distance.

The two detectives were completely lost. If they used their guns, they were almost certain to wound or kill innocent citizens. One of them yelled for lights. There was still one circuit that had not yet been turned on.

Someone found the switch. The room was bathed with the pale illumination of one naked light bulb. There was a pounding of feet near the door. The portal burst open.

"What's going on here?" Wildcat Gordon snapped. "Weren't you two trailing Littleman?"

The two detectives admitted that they had been. They explained briefly what had happened and turned toward the rostrum. Taw Hayshker was still there, leaning weakly on the pulpit. But Edgerton Littleman was gone!

Wildcat questioned Hayshker, but the back-to-the-soil leader insisted that he hadn't the slightest idea what it was all about. He described the scene just as The Whisperer had seen it, but said he couldn't add a thing. He knew Selm only slightly and Littleman scarcely at all; he heartily wished he had never seen either of them. Having delivered himself of that he lowered himself into a chair and vigorously mopped his brow with a colored handkerchief.

Wildcat turned his back on the two crestfallen cops and left the building. When The Whisperer had gotten outside a few moments before, taking advantage of the gloom and the turmoil, Andre Selm had disappeared. While he had been coming back in as Wildcat Gordon, Littleman had disappeared. There were two side doors. The ex-grid star's escape had been simple.

Wildcat was stymied for the moment. If The Whisperer could have gotten Selm Littleman at the right moment back there, he believed he could have learned things. There

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was something peculiar in a subtle change in the attitude of Andre Selm toward the situation; something Wildcat could not now fathom, but which he believed to be important.

The young commissioner stepped into a dingy cigar-store phone booth. Under one arm he carried the dark bundle of clothing that could transform him back into The Whisperer.

His first call was to headquarters. It was just possible that Quick Trigger had some information for him. But Quick had stepped across the street, Slug Minor told him. There was, however, some information. The broadcast for Andre Selm had been handed out to quite a few private sources that could be trusted. A report had just come in.

Within the last few minutes, Andre Selm had been recognized in a telegraph office less than three blocks from where Wildcat Gordon stood. Selm had sent a radiogram, but the informant had refused to divulge the contents of the message for fear of losing his job.

Wildcat whistled softly and pronged the receiver. His second call was to the Centre Street hide-out of The Whisperer. He thought Quick might have had something for him and had slipped across the street to leave a message. He drew a blank there. Then he called the midtown skyscraper hideaway where The Whisperer had taken Mastiff Grenner early in the morning. And here he got a surprise.

The phone in The Whisperer's private hide-out was in use!

That meant that someone was in that secret office, making a call to the outside. An incoming call would be received and recorded without interfering with another call. There were three recording devices that could operate automatically for incoming calls, shunting them off of the main line and leaving it clear.

Someone was using The Whisperer's hideaway for himself! And only two persons knew of the office. Avis Selm was aboard the *Southern Wave* on her way to Florida. And the other person with that knowledge was Mastiff Grenner!

CHAPTER XI.
CRIME MOVES QUICKLY.

And it was, in fact, the dog-faced gang boss who had taken over The Whisperer's secret office. Mastiff had probably realized that neither of his own hide-outs would be safe with The Whisperer alive. And, with criminal cunning, he had chosen the lair of his worst enemy as probably the safest place he could hole up.

The door was strategically located for defense. Of course, The Whisperer had seen to that for his own protection. Half a dozen gunmen ranged around the door, now. There was one figure that did not look like a gunman. He was built like a bean pole, had a long nose, a sallow complexion and wore a gray suit. He kept looking nervously at the limp form of Joseph Bren Mulvane, which lay bound, gagged, and still unconscious on the floor. Mastiff picked up the phone and dialed a number. He looked at the tall man.

"If the blonde hadn't kept a gun on me this morning, we'd of had her, too, Glimp," he purred in his soft voice. He frowned. "The boss said I talked too much to her. Hell, I thought—"

Evidently, someone on the other end of the phone answered. Mastiff listened.

"O. K., I'll hold it," he said.

He looked again at Glimp.

"He certainly is smart," he said. "No one could ever trace him. He gives numbers that turn out to be drugstore phone booths. All I got to do is call at the proper time."

The master criminal apparently came on again then. Mastiff listened. He took out a pencil and wrote down some instructions. A slow grin crept over his evil face. He hung up the phone triumphant.

"I'll have the opportunity to get even with that babe, yet," he gloated softly.

He jumped out of the chair and strode to a powerful short-wave set. Apparently, Mastiff knew short wave and how to handle it. He had the set in operation as soon as the tubes were warm. He called the S. S. *Southern Wave* and asked the ship's operator for a shore-to-ship hookup with Bertram Krausmeyer. Bertram was Skip's legal name. There was some discussion about the permissibility of an unknown private station using the ship-to-shore hookup. But when Mastiff, in his most cultured tones, assured him that Krausmeyer would pay him well, things began to work.

Skip's rough voice came over the the waves in an angry grunt.

"Hell!" he said. "Weasel and me was just beginnin' to think we'd like a little vacation in Florida."

Mastiff Grenner ignored him.

"The two packages must be delivered to the Palisades vault," he instructed. "You will follow previous instructions. A meeting with accredited messengers is being arranged."

Skip Krausmeyer grunted.

"O. K., boss," he said. "We'll be ready."

Mastiff Grenner switched off The Whisperer's powerful short-wave set. He grinned at Rockwell Glimp.

"There are two things that please me greatly," he purred. "One is using The Whisperer's own short-wave set for my message to the *Southern Wave*. The other is wrecking the same outfit."

The maniacal sadism of Grenner showed plainly as he leaped from the chair on which he had been sitting, picked it up by the back and began smashing the radio apparatus. Low, guttural growls replaced his normally silky utterances. His hatred for The Whisperer was expressed in savage swings of the straight-backed chair against the delicate structure of the short-wave set.

It was that crashing noise that arrested the attention of Dunk Smith as he stepped off the express elevator at the twenty-third floor.

Wildcat Gordon had gone directly to The Whisperer's coupé from the phone booth and had become The Whisperer on that trip up to the midtown area.

Now a hiss of warning issued from the lips of The Whisperer. His queer, oversized automatics were in his hands as he paused to listen to the smashing of his valuable short-wave set. And then The Whisperer was again stalking crime.

As silently as the moon sliding behind a cloud, he padded up the deserted corridor. There were no other tenants to be endangered. It was long past the end of the office day. Every other office on the twenty-third floor was empty.

And that fact helped Mastiff Grenner's lookout see the wraithlike figure gliding silently toward the door. The lookout was smart enough to start shooting without asking questions! On that deserted floor, no one would have heard the blasting of his automatic. But he was not smart enough to realize that The

As he fired, The Whisperer kept seeking newer and more certain targets.

Whisperer had prepared for just such an emergency.

The wainscoting of one entire side of that corridor was one solid bulletproof mirror! The lookout thought he was shooting at The Whisperer. But his third shot was answered with a bluish stab of flame and a faint hiss of death. The gunman slumped to the floor of the corridor, through with crime forever.

The door of Dunk Smith's office slammed open then. Three of Mastiff Grenner's mobsters crouched there. It is doubtful if any of the three would have been brave enough to thrust themselves forward into the path of The Whisperer's guns. But there were three other mobsters behind them who had heeded a nod from Mastiff Grenner. They slammed into those closest to the door, forcing them out where they had no alternative but to swap lead with The Whisperer!

But the trade was not even. Shooting alternately from either hand, the foe of crime ripped leaden slugs into the three gunmen.

As he fired, The Whisperer kept edging closer to the door, seeking newer and more agile targets. He got one suddenly; a tall, stringy form hurtled from the doorway.

The Whisperer could tell from the overbalanced position of that

body that it was not coming willingly. This one also had been thrust from behind. The Whisperer did not want to shoot an unwilling target. But he had no alternative. The stringy figure of Rockwell Glimp was aiming a shiny automatic in the gloom. Thrust into the vortex, the crooked employee of Joseph Bren was striving vainly to take the life of The Whisperer to save his own.

One supersilenced gun spoke hissingly. A slug plowed through Glimp's right shoulder. It was not a fatal shot. It would have insured Glimp's inability to get away and, The Whisperer knew, his subsequent willingness to talk.

Apparently, Mastiff Grenner knew that, too. The slug that killed the young traitor came from behind. Rockwell Glimp's mouth dropped open. Excruciating pain showed in his eyes. Then he began to slump slowly. He tried to turn his head accusingly at his fellow in crime who had murdered him to seal his lips. But he couldn't quite make it. He fell, still running. His dying body slammed into The Whisperer and tangled his legs.

Mastiff Grenner took quick advantage of that temporary entanglement. He plunged out of the office, barking orders at the remainder of his henchmen. They followed him,

racing toward the elevator doors. The Whisperer freed himself and plunged out after them. Both supersilenced weapons were in his hands. The wraithlike fighter was sure that he could account for every man of the gang if he could corner them in the narrow space in front of the elevators.

But when he reached the spot, he realized that Mastiff Grenner had worked cleverly. He had apparently either bribed an elevator operator or run one cage himself, pinning the door open an inch or so and tripping the control lever so it couldn't be taken down again until he used it.

When The Whisperer rounded the corner, he saw the indicator needle passing the twentieth floor.

There was a building phone there. He could have phoned the starter in the lobby to halt Mastiff and his gang. And the net result would cost the starter his life. The Whisperer turned back to the office where Joseph Bren Mulvane lay unconscious on the floor.

The bushy-haired industrialist was trying to sit up when The Whisperer came back into the office. He was still tied. And his brain was still dazed. He muttered strange things to himself, like a man in a nightmare. Then, suddenly, he opened his eyes and sanity showed in his expression.

"Rockwell Glimp!" he blurted. "He came up behind me with a gun. Where is he?"

The chilling tones of The Whisperer brought Mulvane more completely back to consciousness.

"Rockwell Glimp is dead; killed by his own accomplices. But I am afraid there are other things that are even greater cause of worry to you. Glimp was just a minor tool."

Mulvane sat erect, obviously in command of all of his faculties. He looked at The Whisperer with the coldly appraising eye of a man accustomed to handling men.

"If you are a friend, tell me so now and I will believe you," Mulvane said evenly. "Good heavens, I've got to believe in someone!"

"You are not as much alone as you think," The Whisperer told him. "First, tell me everything you heard in this room."

Mulvane shook his head.

"Not a thing. Believe me! I just recovered consciousness for the first time since Glimp smashed me over the head a block from the plant."

"I believe you," The Whisperer said.

The black-clad fighter busied himself with the short-wave radio. There was no question that Mastiff Grenner had put that out of business; it was a complete shambles. But there was one thing about that short-wave set that Mastiff Grenner hadn't known. There was an automatic recording hookup that made a permanent record of every incoming and outgoing call on the set. And its reproduction was independent of the set itself.

The Whisperer turned on the play-back. Mastiff Grenner's call, the reply of Skip Krausmeyer and the instructions of the gang boss came clearly from the record. The Whisperer turned to Mulvane.

"The two packages, in case you are not aware of it, are two girls. One is the daughter of a retired police deputy. The other is Avis Selm. If they are kidnaped and delivered to what Grenner terms the Palisades vault, enough pressure will result, I am certain, to ruin you. I think you had better talk and not hold anything back."

Mulvane wiped sweat from his brow.

"Heavens, my best friend's daughter in a spot like that because I was afraid to consult the authorities!"

"Talk!" The Whisperer repeated. "Talk now. I have no time to waste!"

Mulvane rolled his eyes in mental anguish.

"I'll tell you," he blurted. "You know that IPRI has long made a reputation, and millions of dollars as well, in experimental work of tremendous value to industry. You probably also know, if you read the scientific columns of newspapers, of the tremendous discovery of U-235, the isotope of uranium that gives atomic power in such tremendous amounts that it will revolutionize the world of commerce and industry. But, also, such power can be used by a warlike nation as a superweapon —in fact, one which, if produced through this secret, can destroy all mankind. That much is a matter of general information.

"You may know that; but you do not know, unless you have really investigated U-235, that the greatest advancement in the production of this amazing element—the most productive method of concentrating this atomic power which was developed by Krasny-Ergen*—would permit only the manufacture of a single gram in three years in a thermal diffusion tube thirty feet high. We in IPRI believe we have developed a system many times as efficient; one that will permit, when it is completed, the immediate mass production of the wonder isotope of all time!"

Mulvane was panting when he finnished. His face was flushed and his breath labored. The tremendous possibilities of the discovery were, for the moment, uppermost in his mind. His concentration upon them made him forget the treachery within his organization.

Then it all came back. His face fell, paled as he faced The Whisperer. His shoulders sagged.

"And, now, what can I do?" he said miserably. "These crooks have Selm, no doubt. They have his daughter. Perhaps they are even in possession of the secret, itself. If so, I am beaten."

A chuckling whisper came from the black-clad man before him.

"You are not beaten yet, Joseph Mulvane. Go immediately to police headquarters. Ask for either Richard Traeger or Slug Minor. Tell them that you are hunting your missing partner and that you wish to be of whatever help you can. It will be better if you do not mention this meeting. Go, now!"

As he talked to Mulvane, The Whisperer untied him. The bushy-haired industrialist scrambled to his feet. There was gratitude in his face.

"This meeting is something that I will never mention," he said huskily. "But it will always warm me to remember that The Whisperer came to my aid when I needed help the most."

Mulvane darted quickly out of the door. As it closed, a soft chuckle came from The Whisperer. But it was not until he heard the closing door of the elevator that the dental plates came from his mouth. Then he quickly dialed the number of Wildcat Gordon's private phone at headquarters. Quick Trigger answered.

"Mulvane is on his way down to help as much as he can," Wildcat snapped. "Don't ask him any questions. Just let him help. And you,

* Ed: Professor Wilhelm Krasny-Ergen of the University of Stockholm's Wenner-Grens Institute.

Henry and Slug have got a job to do. Take Mulvane with you if you want to, but don't tell anyone else where you're going."

Quick only grunted. He could smell the kind of an assignment he liked. And he was already beginning to enjoy the kind of jitters he knew Henry Bolton would have.

"Go to the Palisades," Wildcat instructed. "You'll be way out of your jurisdiction. If anyone questions that, you're just on a hike. But, somewhere there, you should find a hidden tunnel or cavern that can be used as a hideaway for Mastiff Grenner. And—" Wildcat sounded as miserable as he really was—"I have reason to believe that Tiny and Avis Selm will be taken there before many hours."

The growl of anger that came back from Quick Trigger told Wildcat that he needn't have any misconception about how thoroughly the old man would search for the "vault" in the Palisades.

But there was no feeling of triumph as Wildcat hung up and phoned the offices of the steamship company that owned the *Southern Wave*. There was too much at stake that was dear to the heart of the youthful commissioner for him to feel pleased about what he had done.

The steamship company asked Wildcat to hold the wire when he identified himself as Police Commissioner Gordon and requested the exact position of the *Southern Wave*. Then, after presumably checking the latest reports from the ship's operator, the navigation office told him that the *Southern Wave* was somewhere north of Cape Charles, approximately seventy-five miles from Norfolk.

Wildcat's next call was to LaGuardia Airport, where, as Dunk Smith, he kept a fast amphibian. His voice disguised, he directed that the plane be fueled and made ready for an immediate take-off.

The Whisperer climbed into his black coupé and raced over Queensborough Bridge to Northern Boulevard. He gave her all the gas she had, getting to LaGuardia Airport. He shot into a parking space and hurried out of the car.

But as he disappeared into the main building, the rumble seat of the black coupé opened furtively. A dim figure climbed out, scurried off in the same direction.

Chin buried in his coat collar, The Whisperer hurried out onto the field and to the trim amphibian which, by special police permission, was always kept ready to go.

He turned momentarily from the ship and asked pertinent questions about the fuel and oil. The attendant answered, addressing him as Mr. Smith. Apparently satisfied, The Whisperer climbed into the cabin and taxied to the end of the field. He got an O. K. from the dispatcher above the administration building and gave the trim ship the gun, heading the nose of the amphibian toward the southeast. Soon Perth Amboy flashed by beneath the tail of the ship. The Whisperer put the craft on automatic control on a steady climb. Then he removed the odd dental plates, switched on the two-way radio and began calling the radio operator of the *Southern Wave*.

When he got an answer, he identified himself as Wildcat Gordon and asked routine questions, trying not to tip the operator to his real point of interest.

The radio operator volunteered information about a fire aboard a small boat at sea. The boat wasn't ex-

actly small, he explained; she was a fifty-foot bridge-deck cruiser. The radio operator gave her serial number and told that the fire had been extinguished aboard before the lifeboat from the *Southern Wave* could reach her.

Wildcat's jaw tensed at that. He didn't like the convenient blaze that extinguished itself just before help —and consequent investigation—arrived.

"Please get me in touch with Miss Traeger right away," he snapped. "She sailed with you and is the daughter of one of my deputies. She will be sharing a cabin with Miss Avis Selm."

The radio operator left the transmitter for a couple of minutes. When he came back, his voice sounded a little queer.

"We can't seem to locate them, commissioner," he admitted. "We are still trying. Shall I call you back?"

Wildcat's voice was hard with worry.

"Yes," he barked, and gave the radio operator the wave length and call letters of his private set back in New York. That would avoid identification of The Whisperer's plane; yet he could tune in on it and intercept the message.

Then, still using the staccato tones of Wildcat Gordon, he contacted the government bureau of navigation. He asked for information on the fifty-foot bridge-deck cruiser with the serial numbers given him by the radio operator of the *Southern Wave*. The bureau clerk checked the files, then came back on the air.

"Must be a slip-up somewhere," he suggested. "There isn't any such number as that in issue."

Wildcat growled in anger. He thanked the clerk, then set his receiver at the wave length he had previously given the operator of the *Southern Wave* and left it on.

RICHARD TRAEGER

● Retired Deputy Traeger, known as old Quick Trigger, is Wildcat Gordon's most trusted friend. He, alone, knows the secret of The Whisperer, for it was old Quick who aided Wildcat in devising the ghostlike figure of the underworld who is the foe of crime.

Dental plates replaced—again becoming the mysterious nemesis of crime—The Whisperer's greenish eyes stared ahead and below, hoping for the distant wink of light that would be the coastal liner. He didn't see that. But he did notice

a red light blink three times below him.

The Whisperer switched over to manual control and climbed to eight thousand feet, striving for extended visibility in order to sight the *Southern Wave* through his night glasses.

He was concentrating on his problems sufficiently that he did not hear the faint rustle in the back of the cabin.

The long arm of justice did not know that he had a stowaway until a heavy body crashed against him from behind! The Whisperer twisted, fighting against steely hands that were gripped around his neck.

The attacker strove to throttle certain nerve centers that would bring about quick unconsciousness.

"Ah, mi amigo, so, thee Wheesperer ees Wildcat Gordon as well. Señor Grenner weel be much grateful to find that out."

The Whisperer slammed one compact fist into the man's midriff. It was as hard and conditioned as a piece of boiler plate. Slanted. greenish eyes were staring into shiny black buttons, then, in the dimness of the plane's single instrument panel light.

The face into which The Whisperer looked contained all the cruelty of the Spanish Inquisition. He recognized the smooth and oily features of Carlos del Prado, renegade Mexican flier of unsavory repute. Del Prado had once been the central figure in an aërial kidnaping that had had Mexico City standing on its tiptoes. The man had been originally trained in the army, and he prided himself on his constant physical condition.

The Whisperer's hands were also hands of steel. His compact fingers encircled the throat of his assailant. The two men were of about the same weight, and both possessed strength far beyond appearances.

It looked like stalemate; like two ferocious animals, battling to the death.

The amphibian was out of control, now! Wind shrieked past the wings in an angry scream of doom. She spiraled, then went into a howling spin that straightened into an uncharted, unchecked dive.

Faintly, as the ship plummeted toward the swells of the Atlantic, The Whisperer heard another voice. It was the radio operator of the *Southern Wave* reporting to Wildcat Gordon in New York.

"Can not locate Miss Traeger or Miss Selm," the operator said in a frightened voice. "Two men passengers also missing along with a life raft from the after main deck. Ship was stopped, a search made of the sea without result. The passengers haven't been seen for nearly an hour, since before the attempt was made to rescue the burning yacht."

A hissing whisper of defiance came from the black-clad fighter. Corded muscles stood out on his neck as he strangled against the vicious death grip of the Mexican, Del Prado. Then the amphibian lurched again into a spin!

CHAPTER XII.

INTO THE SEA!

Meanwhile, Skip Krausmeyer and his pal, Weasel, had been comfortably aboard the *Southern Wave* for several hours. A sleek speed boat had taken them out to the cruise ship as it was sliding quietly down the Hudson River.

Weasel's first remarks aboard indicated that he didn't feel that their job entailed difficulty.

"Boy, oh, boy!" he exclaimed in his shrill voice, "Florida sunshine,

dames and horses. What an assignment!"

Skip's ugly face darkened.

"If things go the way the boss expects 'em to go," he said, "we ain't goin' to get to Florida."

Weasel apparently was not privy to instructions given to Skip. His reply was questioning but discreet.

"That's right. This tub does stop at Norfolk, don't she?"

"Yeah," Skip muttered; "if not before. Now scram! I got a little job to do."

He watched Avis Selm coming along the deck alone.

She stopped suddenly, recognizing Krausmeyer. In another instant he was beside her, skillfully crowding her to the rail in a way that would not draw the attention of the other passengers. Skip towered over the girl and snarled out of the corner of his mouth:

"One peep out of you, sister, an I'll toss you overboard. If you behave an' act like you never saw me before, maybe you an' your brunette girl friend'll go on livin'."

Avis Selm's lower lip trembled. It is questionable whether she was afraid so much for herself alone. But the thug had included Tiny, also. Avis nodded in acquiescence and turned toward the companionway which led to the salon.

All that had happened before the ship had passed Sandy Hook; before Skip had received the short-wave communication from Mastiff Grenner.

It was some time after that communication that Avis and Tiny went down to the dining salon for dinner. A four-piece orchestra was playing softly, and the ship swayed gently on the calm Atlantic. The atmosphere of the dining room was gay and festive.

Tuxedoed young men looked appreciatively at the table for two that the girls occupied. Either of them was enough to draw a second and a third glance from any young man. The brunette beauty of Tiny complimented the blondness of her school chum. Tiny sensed the uneasiness of her companion; she tried to keep up a light conversation. But Avis Selm was tense and could not quite conceal the anxiety that she felt.

She had been jittery most of the day. Now, she decided that she owed it to Tiny to tell her what was going on. Under the cover of the music, she leaned across the table and spoke in quick, low tones.

"My father is in trouble," she confided. "And I am afraid that his enemies may try to use me to force him to do things he does not want to do. If there is any violence here, Tiny, I want you to run, to get out of it quickly. Had I known that they would follow me, I would not have willingly endangered you."

Tiny Traeger smiled quickly. She was not the daughter of old Quick for nothing. This was something right down her alley. "Two of us can fight better than one," she said sagely. "Who is following us?"

Avis turned around, surveying the dining room. Skip Krausmeyer was not in the room. Avis was just about to comment on that when there was a sudden cessation of the rhythmic pounding of the ship's engines. A faint cry came from the bridge.

Things that happen aboard ship are quickly sensed by the passengers. They may not know the exact routine of the complex organization that constitutes a fast ship at sea. But they sense any break in it. The diners raised their heads, and conversation ceased with that sudden stop of rhythmic motion.

In the sudden quiet, the lookout's voice drifted down and into the open ports.

"Launch afire off starboard!"

There followed the clanging of a bell, calling the seamen to their stations.

Tiny Traeger stood erect and climbed up on her chair. Her table was next to starboard, and she looked out the big porthole. When she stepped down, her face was aglow with excitement.

"There *is* a boat burning out there!" she said. "Let's go up on deck."

Other diners were leaving their tables then. The excitement communicated itself from one to the other. Avis and Tiny were close together as they pushed their way out of the dining room and into the lobby in front of the purser's office. Somehow, they were pushed into a dark corner of the main deck. A rough voice growled into their ears!

"We mean business, Toots. One squawk and we'll blast you both! Don't think we won't."

Against each girl's side pressed the round, relentless muzzle of a gun. Slowly, the guns prodded them aft, away from the crowd. The other passengers were so intent on the spectacle of a burning boat that no one noticed the two frail girls who moved slowly toward the stern amusement deck, where four life rafts were tethered in the darkness.

Skip Krausmeyer gave every indication that he had meant what he said in pressing a gun against Avis Selm's spine.

As for Weasel, Tiny Traeger had needed only a glance at the dilated pupils of his eyes to know that he had enough dope in him to think no more of murder than he would have about hunting ducks.

Both girls went along toward the after part of the main deck.

The amusement deck was in darkness. It would be an hour after dinner before the amusement director would turn on the lights for the evening's dancing.

Skip Krausmeyer cursed to himself at the inconvenience to which he had been placed. He held his automatic in his right hand and kept it trained on Avis Selm. With a clasp knife, he cut a life raft loose from its moorings. He strained every muscle upending the thing and sliding it over the rail. It splashed into the water on the opposite side from the still blazing boat.

Every person aboard the *Southern Wave,* who wasn't engaged in work that took his entire attention, was staring intently at the smoke and flame that poured from the small pleasure cruiser. There is something thrilling about a rescue at sea; something that demands fascinated attention.

When the life raft splashed into the water, Skip quickly seized Avis. With skillful speed, he tied a handkerchief gag across her mouth, then hurled her over the rail.

"I hope you can both swim," he growled. "An' you better do it far enough to get on that raft."

Tiny Traeger struggled. But she was no match for two men, one of whom still held a gun on her back. Skip gagged Tiny and tossed her over the rail. The two thugs followed. Skip climbed up on the life raft before either of the girls; then he pulled Avis up on the float. Tiny Traeger splashed up to the raft. She'd been so busy keeping herself afloat that she had not had time to rip off the handkerchief gag. And that, Skip told her as he hauled her out of the water, was as he had planned it. Weasel clambered com-

Skip seized Avis Selm. With skillful speed, he tied a handkerchief gag around her mouth.

plainingly onto the raft, his teeth chattering.

"G-g-g-gee!" he moaned. "I need a shot. But bad!"

"You'll get it as soon as we get picked up," Skip grunted. "Pipe down. Someone might hear you."

The *Southern Wave* had not en-

tirely lost way, even though the engines had been stopped for several minutes. The huge bulk of a liner will keep moving by her own momentum for a considerable distance. The great black hull towered above the tiny raft, slid silently by. Soon the raft passed beneath the stern.

Then Tiny and Avis could see that the blazing boat was keeping enough headway of her own to draw attention away from the stern of the *Southern Wave*. When the big ship was a hundred yards away from them, Skip took a waterproof flashlight from one pocket. He blinked it twice, shielding the red light so that he could not be seen from the liner. Then he laughed shortly and turned to Avis.

"Here's a radiogram for you," he grinned. "I happened to be getting a message for myself, so I told the operator I'd take it to you at dinner."

He laughed at his joke as Avis, chilled fingers trembling, tore open the yellow envelope. There was enough light from the stars to make out the black typewritten words:

Ask the captain for immediate protection. You are in great danger. Dad.

Avis' face went a dead-white.

"You beast," she whispered hoarsely. "You think you can force dad to do what you want."

Skip laughed again.

"He ain't the only one, Toots. This cutie here's got a dad on the police force. An' I don't think Wildcat Gordon'll do much that'll hurt the dame."

Tiny Traeger flared. Anger coursed through her veins, making her forget that she was chilled to the bone.

"Wildcat Gordon doesn't care *that* for me," she said with a snap of her fingers. "And Quick Trigger is too much of a policeman to give in to a kidnaper like you."

Skip put one finger along the side of his nose.

"We'll see, we'll see," he said. "I think maybe a present of one of your ears might make 'em both weaken some."

Skip stopped talking, then. A dim shape loomed in the blackness of the night, and both girls could see the sleek, trim lines of the cruiser. An expert helmsman brought her knife-like prow alongside of the tossing raft. The muffled clang of an engine-room signal came through the night. Diesels pounded in reverse, its twin screws spuming white whirlpools up under the stern of the craft. She stopped, with the tiny raft beside a gangway amidships that was miniature in its perfecton.

Tiny Traeger stood uneasily on her feet and gripped the polished brass rail of the gangway. Her blue eyes looked up into the most evil face that it had ever been her misfortune to view. Her instinctive recoil brought a snarling laugh from a face that did not seem to be a face at all.

The man was scrawny and small. Acid had at some time seared it, so that the resulting scar tissue obliterated the impression that it had a nose at all. Even Tiny knew the reputation that went with the face. It was a reputation that had ridden roughshod over night clubs, over politicians and even over the great Rum Row back in the frantic '20s.

But once Fog Gleason had highjacked the wrong boatload of rum. The owner of that boatload proved tougher than Fog. But even after that, Fog Gleason still retained the reputation of being the smartest and best rumboat skipper to make a fast haul from the row. He could smell

a landing spot in thick weather, it was said.

Fog Gleason chewed the end of a black cigar and spat over the rail.

"Bring 'em in, Skip," he said in a deep, seaman's voice. "Always glad to have company."

Gleason stepped into the pilot house and rang for full speed ahead. The fifty feet of mahogany, brass and steel leaped like a race horse under the pulsing of the twin Diesels. Then Tiny noticed the strange chore of one man on the decks. He was picking up wide iron pans that seemed filled with a blackish dust. Her puzzled interest was apparent.

Skip Krausmeyer laughed.

"Fire pots, sister. That's what made all the smoke and flame that brought the *Southern Wave* to a stop. When I signaled Fog here that I had you gals on the raft, he just put the 'fire' out and came along to pick us up. Now, we're all set."

Fog Gleason spat again over the side.

"Not yet," he rumbled. "We ain't set until we find out about a guy who left New York in a plane. The boss says he thinks it's The Whisperer."

Tiny brightened.

"The Whisperer!" she exclaimed, fresh hope in her voice.

"Take it easy, lady," Fog Gleason said. "He's got a passenger that he don't know about."

Skip Krausmeyer growled and rubbed the back of his head reflectively.

"Boy! I've got a score to settle with that baby. I hope we get him down here. I'd—"

"Shut up!" Fog Gleason rapped.

In the distance, to the north, there came the faint drone of an airplane.

TINY TRAEGER

● **Tiny is the dark-haired, pert daughter of old Quick Trigger. A diminutive bundle of loveliness, she nurses a secret devotion for Wildcat Gordon.**

The drone drew steadily closer with a roar.

Fog Gleason leaped to a searchlight on the top of the bridge deck and slid a red lens into a slot. The one skinny hand closed over a signal key. He waited for a moment. Then he pressed it three times.

"If Carlos sees that, he'll know we're ready," he growled.

Immediately, the plane nosed down. The motor screamed in the rage of a free dive! Everyone on the cruiser stood, spellbound. The plane went from the power dive into a flat spin. Red flame shot from the exhausts of the big radial motor. She snapped out of the spin and

dived again with a roar. Then, a final spin ended in an apparent tremendous effort on someone's part to right the ship.

Momentarily, the amphibian flattened out. Her forward speed was tremendous. Nose still slightly down, she struck a wave crest with a splintering crash in the night as the pontoons ripped from the fuselage! The plane turned entirely over on her back, one wing torn loose.

There was only the foam-flecked silence of the sea for a moment. Then a wisp of red flame curled up. The flame spread, a dull-red glare, showing a single figure crouching on the floating wing. Then, with a loud hiss of extinguished flame, the main body of the plane slid beneath the waves.

Fog Gleason grunted. He pulled the red-glass slide from the searchlight, spun the wheel hard over and headed for the now almost invisible piece of wing that floated on the ocean swell.

"Get a Tommy-gun from the rack, Skip," he rumbled. "It might be the wrong guy on that wing."

Gleason held the light until the sleek cruiser was almost upon the dark floating object. Then he flashed it on in sudden brilliance. A voice came silkily from the sea.

"Señor, you weel blind me. Turn thee dam' theeng off. *Dios mio,* as soon would Carlos look at the sun."

Fog Gleason grunted again.

"Climb aboard, Carlos. Guess you got a brag comin'. What happened to the other guy?"

The rescued flier gave an imitation of a whispering chuckle.

"Ah, that wan. He ees not half so toff when Carlos get heem in a plane. He ees dead, down weeth thee feesh!"

The dapper figure strutted down the deck and into the main cabin He clapped his hands.

"Queek, amigo. We have a dreenk, no?"

Skip Krausmeyer followed admiringly. Tiny Traeger slumped against Avis Selm. The blond girl couldn't understand Tiny's sudden relapse at news of The Whisperer's death.

For that matter, Quick Trigger and Wildcat were always mystified by Tiny's reactions. Neither of them was ever sure how much the dark-haired girl knew or suspected of the double identity. Tiny didn't give much indication, now. But she did straighten Avis out on something.

"Oh!" Tiny sobbed. "He . . . he was, at least, a friend."

"Not no more he ain't," Skip bellowed. "Now, we'll all have a drink."

Weasel had different ideas.

"Not me," he squawked. "I want that shot you promised. Right in the arm."

Krausmeyer sighed and walked toward a medicine cabinet against one wall of the cabin.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TORTURE CHAMBER.

9 p. m. is not a usual hour for four men, two of them well into middle age, to start out on a hike, particularly when the terrain chosen is the rocky loneliness of the deserted part of New Jersey's Palisades.

The two more venerable members of the party were Quick Trigger and Joseph Mulvane. The others in the party were Slug Minor and Henry Bolton. Bolton didn't like any part of the venture. He didn't like the Palisades; he was worried about being out of their jurisdiction and was certain that Wildcat was probably

somewhere that was very comfortable.

"Wildcat never does his own work any more," he complained. "I have to carry the brunt of all the hard work for the department."

"Heaven help the department if you ever have to do the cerebratin' for us," Slug grunted.

"The what?" Henry whined, tripping over a boulder.

"Thinkin', Long-nose," Slug answered. "You're only good as a horse and not too good at that."

Bolton quivered with rage. It would have been bad enough with just Quick Trigger there. But with an influential industrialist like Mulvane listening, this was practically treason. He straightened his shoulders.

"After all, Minor. I must remind you that I am still deputy commissioner."

"Cut it!" Quick Trigger growled. "This is not a picnic."

Quick stepped on a loose rock, sent it tumbling off into space. Slug Minor stopped suddenly.

"Listen," he rumbled.

The others listened. There was a distinct metal *clang*. Henry Bolton sniffed.

"Well, what's so important about that?"

"I used to play around here when I was a kid," Slug explained. "I remember this particular section like a book. We used to rope ourselves together with clothesline and imagine it was Mount Everest. There shouldn't be any metal down there for that rock Quick loosened to clang against!"

Slug had brought along two hundred feet of stout line. Bolton had ridiculed him for it when they started. He didn't ridicule him, now. The burly cop made one end fast to a heavy boulder. Then he slid down the face of the cliff. He cupped his hands around his lips and called up as softly as he could.

"There's a path down here. Untie that line and loop it; then come down and we can slide it free to take with us. I'm just about twenty feet below you."

Joseph Mulvane leaped forward.

"Let's go," he said. "I think we're on the right track. I've a lot of confidence in the fellow who sent me here."

That was a slip. Until this minute neither Quick, Bolton nor Slug had any idea that Mulvane knew anything about the "vault" in the Palisades. The trip had been Wildcat's idea passed on to Quick Trigger. Bolton's small mouth dropped open. It was a predicament. He didn't like to tangle with a powerful man like Mulvane. But he had to say something.

"W-what? Who told you about it?"

Mulvane colored. He realized he had made a slip.

"I . . . er . . . I m-meant, the commissioner. D-didn't he give the orders to search here?"

It was a quick recovery, but it brought a grin from old Quick. His eyes twinkled under his shaggy brows. Quick suspected where Mulvane had learned about the Palisades trip; so he didn't add further questions. Mulvane solved his dilemma by sliding quickly down the rope.

When he got to the path he found he was alone. Slug Minor had apparently gone ahead in the darkness. Suddenly, a bellowing roar was heard from Slug!

"Stand still, you rats, or I'll fill you full of lead!" Slug yelled.

His answer was a sound of scurrying feet.

The firing of a Police Positive ripped out in the gloom. There was

an impact of flesh on flesh and a string of mule-driver descriptives from Slug.

"I've got him," the barrel-chested cop bellowed. "Here's the first of the rats. Let's look him over."

By that time Bolton and Quick Trigger had slid down the rope with hand-scorching speed. They raced up with Mulvane. Quick washed the ground with his flashlight.

And the wide, starkly-staring eyes of Andre Selm looked unblinkingly into the shaft of light.

Joseph Mulvane's jaw dropped open like a trap. His expression was one of incredulity.

"Andre! Heavens, man, what are you doing here?"

Andre Selm looked at his fellow director as if he had never seen him before. With one skinny hand he absently rubbed a bloody flesh wound in one arm. His mouth opened two or three times as if it were a movement without volition. Then he spoke, his sepulchral voice a dead thing without inflection.

"I have nothing to say. It is useless to ask me questions. I have nothing to say."

His dark, staring eyes looked from one to the other of his four captors. His white face was as dry as parchment, giving the impression that the sweat glands had all dried up and that fear could make only dust of him.

Slug Minor jerked him to his feet. He inspected the wound in the arm, passed it over as not serious. Slug took handcuffs from his pocket, slipped them over Andre Selm's wrist. Quick Trigger stepped up to the gaunt, harried man. Old Quick's eyes were not as harsh as they might have been.

"My daughter and yours are in danger together, Selm," he rumbled. "Don't you think you'd better cooperate?"

Selm's big eyes widened darkly.

"Y-your daughter? I didn't know Avis was going with your daughter. The name didn't mean a thing to me. N-names seldom do."

Selm brightened for a moment. It looked as if the ice were broken; as if he had suddenly realized that he was among friends. Then his face clouded again, and the expression went out of the dark, staring eyes. His voice was sullen.

"No! I cannot talk. I won't!" He looked sharply at Quick. "You wouldn't either, if you knew the danger those two girls are in."

Quick snorted. He rubbed one eye with the gnarled knuckle of one hand. There had been times when he had wished he'd never been a cop. This was one of them.

"Let's go," he growled. "We've got work to do here."

Slug was still in the lead. He shoved the hapless, apparently insensible Andre Selm ahead of them. The path fanned out somewhat in a gentle downward direction. At one point it skirted a sheer rock wall overlooking the quiet Hudson. Below the lip of the path, the Palisades dropped perpendicularly for nearly a hundred feet.

It was when they were in the center of that lip that Mastiff Grenner made his appearance. The boss thug was crouched behind a boulder at the farther end of the path. The muzzle of a Tommy-gun poked over the boulder. Behind Mastiff were half a dozen ugly faces and as many submachine guns.

"Welcome, my friends," Mastiff purred in his oily voice. "We will be glad to entertain you. I knew Selm was trying to find me."

Slug Minor let out a bellowing roar and leaped forward. Mastiff's

Tommy-gun chattered in warning! Stone chips flew up at Slug's feet. The burly cop skidded to a stop. Suicide wasn't brave; it wasn't even smart. Mastiff Grenner laughed silkily.

"There isn't a thing you can do," he purred.

And to back up his statement, six figures suddenly emerged from the pathway behind the men on the precipice. The gunman inched toward their quarry like relentless automatons.

Quick whirled, hauled out his huge cannonlike revolvers and began to blast. That drew only another laugh from Mastiff Grenner. The thugs were equipped with bullet-proof steel shields, something like those that shield the driver of an armored motorcycle. They blasted with automatics through tiny slits. A slug plowed into Quick Trigger's shoulder, whirled him around!

They were directly between two fires without a chance to fight or escape. Any resistance, now, would be ordinary suicide. Quick shrugged. A play for time was the only chance they had.

"Let 'em take us, boys. This seems to be Grenner's inning."

Mastiff Grenner's amusement knew no bounds as he watched his mobbies disarm the prisoners. They were marched ahead, past the boulder that had shielded the crime czar.

A quarter of a mile from there, Grenner paused behind a six-foot boulder that seemed to lean against the cliff. An iron pipe protruded from the floor of the path, and Grenner unscrewed a cap on the end and pressed a button under it.

There came a dull sound of machinery in operation, the big boulder swung slowly outward. It was revealed then to be cleverly cast plastic of a texture that seemed to have all the qualities of solid rock.

Mastiff, his thugs and the prisoners crowded inside. Lights were flicked on, revealing a massive elevator that descended vertically into the rock. The giant lift was big enough to take all of them in a single load. It dropped slowly with a rumble of heavy machinery.

Slug Minor's eyes stared incredulously.

"I remember as a kid we used to hear stories about great caves somewhere in the Palisades. We were always huntin' for them. But we never found anythin' like this."

Mastiff Grenner laughed.

"The boss has improved upon nature. He did a little blasting to make the place better than it was."

Finally, the elevator stopped with a solid bump. Grenner led the way through a natural archway into a cavern that must have been a hundred and fifty feet long and nearly half as wide. A deep-water lock, like a docking slip, took up one end of the place. A small gasoline engine chugged away in one corner, powering a portable lighting unit. Yellowish bulbs burned on the walls of the cave.

And also along the walls was a collection of medieval torture instruments that must have been stolen from a museum. There were racks, thumbscrews and thumb loops, by which a victim could be suspended from the ceiling. At one side an "iron lady" gaped, her long spiked internal teeth seemingly yawning for a victim. Mastiff waved at the exhibition proudly.

"Sometimes we have a little difficulty in getting our guests to cooperate," he said. "But we can usually overcome that."

The prisoners were ranged along

SLUG MINOR

● Wildcat Gordon's untiring effort once saved Slug Minor, then a water-front roustabout, from a framed robbery charge. The giant Slug has since endeavored to repay the commissioner's complete faith in his role as Wildcat's chauffeur and strong-arm aid.

one wall. Ring bolts had been concreted into holes in the stone there. They were all tied securely. Then Grenner strode down to Andre Selm. He laughed in his face.

"So you're the guy who was crazy enough to think the boss was on the level?"

His voice dropped to a growl.

"Your dumbness damned near got me in trouble. How'd I know I shouldn't tell your gal some of the facts. I figured she was working with you and that you knew what you were doing."

Selm's head came up. The dark, staring eyes looked at Grenner's sneering, doglike face. His sepulchral voice was scarcely audible.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you would figure that. I've tried to rectify my errors since she told me I had been working with a crook. But the cards were stacked against me."

Mastiff sneered.

"Well, the boss can bump you, now, just like he did Maynard Nicholson in Jersey. You aren't any more use to him."

Andre Selm sagged against his bonds. It did not seem that his strength could last much longer in the chill, dank air of the subterranean chamber. His lips worked strangely, and a ghost of a smile came to them.

"That's one card I still may have," he said in a mere whisper.

CHAPTER XIV.
FIFTH COLUMN.

The cruiser climbed up to forty miles an hour with her twin Diesels. She knifed the ocean waves with the speed and stability of the rumrunning days when a hundred thousand dollars was nothing to spend on a boat that wasn't more than an overgrown motor launch.

Half an hour before reaching Sandy Hook, the scar-faced skipper growled down a speaking tube to the after cabin. The occupants were Skip Krausmeyer, Weasel, the two girls, a deckhand and the smiling, sneering Mexican.

"Come up and take the wheel, Dopey," Fog Gleason rumbled in his seagoing voice. "I'll congratulate Carlos in person before we get in. Besides, I need a drink."

The deckhand grinned vacantly

and climbed up the companion ladder and onto the deck.

On a center table in the cabin stood a quart bottle of bourbon whiskey, about an inch of liquor left in the bottom. Skip Krausmeyer was glowing expansively, having killed most of it himself. Weasel looked stupidly in front of him, doped up to the eyes.

The two girls were huddled into one of the two bunks in the cabin. In the other bunk, most of his head covered by his flying helmet, was the survivor of the battle in the plane. He lounged back, a Mexican *cigarro* between lips half hidden by the shadow of the bulkhead. He twirled a stem glass of brandy between his fingers, spoke with smooth Latin effrontery.

"To thee ladies," he said, sipping from his glass. "Skeep, you peek good wans from the boat."

Skip Krausmeyer grinned a little foolishly. The bourbon was going to his head. But before he could reply, the companionway door opened and the gnarled and stunted form of Fog Gleason thrust itself in like some repulsive crab.

"A damn good sailor's job you did, Carlos," he boomed. "The boss ought to give you a good bonus on that one."

Fog picked up the brandy bottle, which was beside the bourbon and much fuller. Little gimlet eyes stared at the lounging Mexican. The Mexican twirled his glass some more, looked at his fingernails.

"*Si,* Señor Gleason. I am agree. Tonight was wan fine job beyond doubt."

Fog Gleason gripped the brandy bottle by the neck and tipped it toward a glass. Then with one swift, snakelike motion, he hurled it straight at the face of the lolling man in the flyer's suit and helmet!

"Right you are, rat. But Carlos del Prado chewed his fingernails. You aren't Del Prado at all!"

The "Mexican" came out of the bunk with a hissing challenge that sounded like escaping steam! The sibilance of the Latin deepened to the warning hiss of The Whisperer. Skip Krausmeyer sobered up as if he had been plunged into ice water —a commodity he suddenly felt running through his veins instead of blood.

Fog Gleason whipped up the other bottle; he brandished it like a club. The Whisperer kept right on coming. He flung the ex-rum skipper aside as if he had been a chip. Weasel struggled to get out of his doped condition, but his motions were slow. Tiny Traeger grabbed Skip Krausmeyer's flashlight and brought it down on Weasel's skull with a report like a gun!

Skip got his automatic out, blasted with it. The smell of scorched wool rose from the flying costume The Whisperer was wearing. There was a soft hiss and a stab of bluish flame from the right hand of the plunging Whisperer. Skip Krausmeyer threw up his hands. A gurgle sounded from his throat; it came right through the outside of his throat with a red deluge of blood.

The Whisperer whirled then to face the crouching form of Fog Gleason. The skipper was a cold, calculating machine. He had crouched behind a metal stanchion that supported a signal mast above the cabin, a gun in his hand. The Whisperer moved aft toward him, both of his supersilenced guns in his hands.

If the girls had not both been so fascinated with the tableau of horror, it might have turned out differently. But a sliding door in the for-

ward bulkhead opened softly. Two figures glided in. One, by his greasy coveralls, was the Diesel engineer. The other was Dopey, the deckhand.

The engineer was first. He drew one hand back like a doughboy about to fling a hand grenade. A fourteen-inch Stillson wrench sailed through the air, caught The Whisperer in the back of the skull.

The long arm of justice had managed to best Carlos del Prado in a straight-out game of strength. The impact of the crash had killed Del Prado. He had managed, with the make-up kit he never traveled without, to resemble the flier. The flying suit had gone over his own clothing. The helmet concealed much of his appearance.

But a man who chewed his fingernails had bested him, even after death!

Skip Krausmeyer was just in the way. Fog Gleason sent the Diesel engineer up to take the wheel for a while. Then he told Dopey to dump the body of Krausmeyer overboard. Skip was just a deficit, now. He leaned over Weasel. The little drug addict was still out. But he still lived. Gleason left him where he was; then he stepped to the two girls, pulled two pairs of handcuffs from his pockets and snapped them on.

He searched The Whisperer, found handcuffs and keys. He put the handcuffs on the foe of crime and searched his clothes thoroughly to see that there were no spare keys. Then he marched the girls up into the after cabin.

Scotland Light and Sandy Hook were now in the background. The fifty-footer roared northward, past Gravesend Bay and into the Narrows, toward Robins Reef, the Upper Bay and the Hudson River. Fog Gleason cut his throttle before he took the Narrows. He crowded the sleek gray craft as much as he dared.

Suddenly Gleason swung his wheel. He ran toward what looked like a modest private boat club, with a tiny slip in which to moor the more pretentious craft of its members. The scar-faced ex-rum skipper spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Dopey.

"Good thing it's night," he grated. "I wouldn't want to have to lay here for many hours with this cargo."

Apparently, the ultimate destination of the cruiser was not one that could be attained in daylight. As Fog cut the speed of the Diesels for an approach to the slip, he switched on a peculiar-looking device beside the wheel. It was an infrared beam of the sort used for the actuation of photoelectric cells.

The cruiser was making about four knots when Gleason signaled for quiet engines. The cruiser glided past the clubhouse like some ethereal shadow from a dream world of sinister ships of war.

Silently, as if well-oiled machinery were moving without a command being voiced, a tremendous slab of concrete that seemed to be holding back a potential avalanche in the rock and gravel of the hillside began to move. It opened up like the jaw of some huge mechanical dragon. And into its maw coasted the cruiser.

Fog Gleason rang for full astern and watched the white whirlpools foam ahead of the trim boat for a moment. He saw Mastiff Grenner and his dozen hoodlums; he saw the five captives lashed to ring bolts on the wall.

"The two gals are here," Gleason yelled. And"—his voice rose a bit—"I've got The Whisperer! Kraus-

meyer and Carlos are both dead."

While he spoke, Dopey and the Diesel engineer emerged from the after cabin. Dopey propelled the two girls before him. The Diesel engineer had a heavier burden; one that was inert and had to be carried. Mastiff Grenner looked at the body sharply.

"Carlos?"

His voice was sharp, as if to demand an explanation as to why trouble had been expended to return a dead body to the gang. Fog Gleason grinned as well as he could with scar-tissue-covered lips.

"Nope! It's The Whisperer in the clothes he stole from Del Prado's body."

A murmur ran up from the mob in the dimly lighted cavern. Half a dozen mobbies stepped forward menacingly. Each would have liked the assignment of giving the *coup de grace* to The Whisperer. But none got it, right then.

The tottering form of Weasel burst from the cabin.

"F'gosh sakes gimme a shot, somebody," he shrilled. "I'm goin' nuts."

Someone aimed a kick at Weasel and he fell against the wall. At that instant the door by the main elevator clanged and two figures stood there. One of them was Edgerton Littleman. The features of the man behind Littleman were indistinguishable, apparently were a plastic mask. A Tommy-gun was cradled in his arms. He shoved Littleman, sent him sprawling on the wet stone floor of the cavern.

"This fool almost got away," the masked one said. His eyes flashed coldly. "This is not the sort of tableau that I have trained you to present."

The voice was like a rapier. Every thug in the place, including Mastiff Grenner, acted as if some high dignitary were about to pass the decree of life or death upon his subjects.

And such, it seemed, was the case.

"All are here, chief," Mastiff said in his softest voice. "None of our immediate enemies has been overlooked."

The man in the plastic mask cast his eyes carefully up and down the line of captives. A sneer crept into his voice. But before he spoke, he strode down to the unconscious form in the flier's suit and kicked it over on its back. Not until he saw the long, oddly-pointed jaw at close quarters was he willing to acknowledge the achievement of Fog Gleason. Then he returned to the raised segment of stone by the elevator.

Edgerton Littleman was kneeling beside Avis Selm.

"Gosh, honey," he said, his nor-

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mally flat voice rich with emotion, "I did everything I could to help your dad. I didn't talk to anyone. And when I called you and you told me that you were sailing in thirty minutes, I thought everything was safe. I—"

"Shut up, fool!" the sneering voice of the masked leader grated. "You babble like a child."

The man with the Tommy-gun sauntered back by the door to the elevator. He surveyed the whole cavern, turned finally to Mastiff Grenner.

"Kill them all, Mastiff," he said smoothly. "You have done well so far. But all these must go. All, that is"—a crafty note crept into the smooth voice—"all except Andre Selm who fancies he has fooled me."

The haggard face of Selm came up. His haggard eyes burned with a fire that had turned to hate.

"I . . . I believed you—you murderer. I know, now, that your fifth column in industry is a gigantic racket. I honestly believed that the world would be better off without U-235. So I helped you sabotage; kept my real friends protecting me; double-crossed the best friend I ever had, Joe Mulvane. I'll kill you now, you—"

Emotion got the best of Andre Selm. His face was livid. But it took more than emotion to accomplish what he did then. He plunged suddenly from the wall and dived for the masked figure with the Tommy-gun. The ropes that had bound him still hung in pieces to his skinny wrists. A gasp of amazement went up from the mobsters. Fog Gleason plunged forward to intercept Andre Selm.

But in that instant the masked leader cut loose with his machine gun! The slugs all but cut Fog Gleason in half. A black automatic clattered to the stone floor from his fingertips.

Still unwounded, Selm bent low, scooped it up. Mastiff Grenner was closing in on the other side. Selm whirled, squeezed the trigger of the automatic. Either he could shoot, or he was very lucky. A black hole jumped into the forehead of the dog-like killer.

But Mastiff's fingers stiffened on the trigger of his gun. Holes punched in the dried up body of Andre Selm. The skinny man sank to the stone floor. But it was not an expression of pain that crossed his lips. It was one of sardonic triumph. The last breath of Andre Selm began with a hollow laugh, and he twisted so that he could look straight into the face of his executioner.

"I inadvertently told you my daughter had sailed too soon. That gave you control. But, now, the last card is mine," he coughed. "I worked for the cause you said would save the world from destruction. But I feared that if I gave my secret to you, someone less worthy might get hold of it. So, you traitor to everyone, I gave you a false one. Sabotage has stolen the written record of the real secret. In time, Joseph Mulvane can recreate it. But you are helpless. The secret dies with me."

There was an awful gurgle, and Andre Selm sank to the floor.

A deep silence descended upon the cavern. There was, at first, only the gentle sobbing of the daughter of the man who lay there dead. Then there was an interruption. The form in the fliers' suit at the end of the line sat suddenly erect. He spat out a set of dental plates that gave his chin an oddly-pointed look.

"Hey!" came the piping tones of Weasel. "How do y'u suppose those things got in there?"

Things began happening, then. From behind the masked man a figure in black moved like an avenging wraith. The leveled Tommy-gun clattered to the stone floor. The Whisperer, who had traded places with Weasel while the boat was coming in, plunged into action! It had long been a matter of habit with The Whisperer to carry a pair of handcuffs with soft plastic links for a decoy. He had more than once been manacled with his own hardware. And this was the answer.

The other prisoners began to move, too. In the guise of drug-soaked Weasel, The Whisperer had released all of the prisoners. They moved, now, whipped up the guns of fallen gangsters. And above it all, there was the steady hiss of The Whisperer's supersilenced guns. The mobbies quit then. One of them took one parting shot. It was aimed at the boss, the supercrook who had promised them success.

As the master mind staggered back, the plastic mask fell off. There was a gasp from everyone but The Whisperer. The wraithlike foe of crime merely chuckled, keeping his tongue over his teeth to simulate the effect of the set he had left in the mouth of Weasel.

"Of course it is Taw Hayshker," he said. "Hayshker is a slicker who simulated the twang of the farm and the backwoods. He used fifth-column tactics to create sabotage and thus gain control of the secrets of industry. He was the great Quistling of American industry."

Slowly, The Whisperer backed toward the elevator. For once, not even Henry Bolton made any attempt to have him apprehended. Henry himself had been too close to death.

"Gee!" he said. "I hope Wildcat doesn't intercept him. He really ought to get a break this time."

Tiny Traeger looked sharply at Henry, and the flush on her pretty face was more than just mere pride.

THE END.

★ ★

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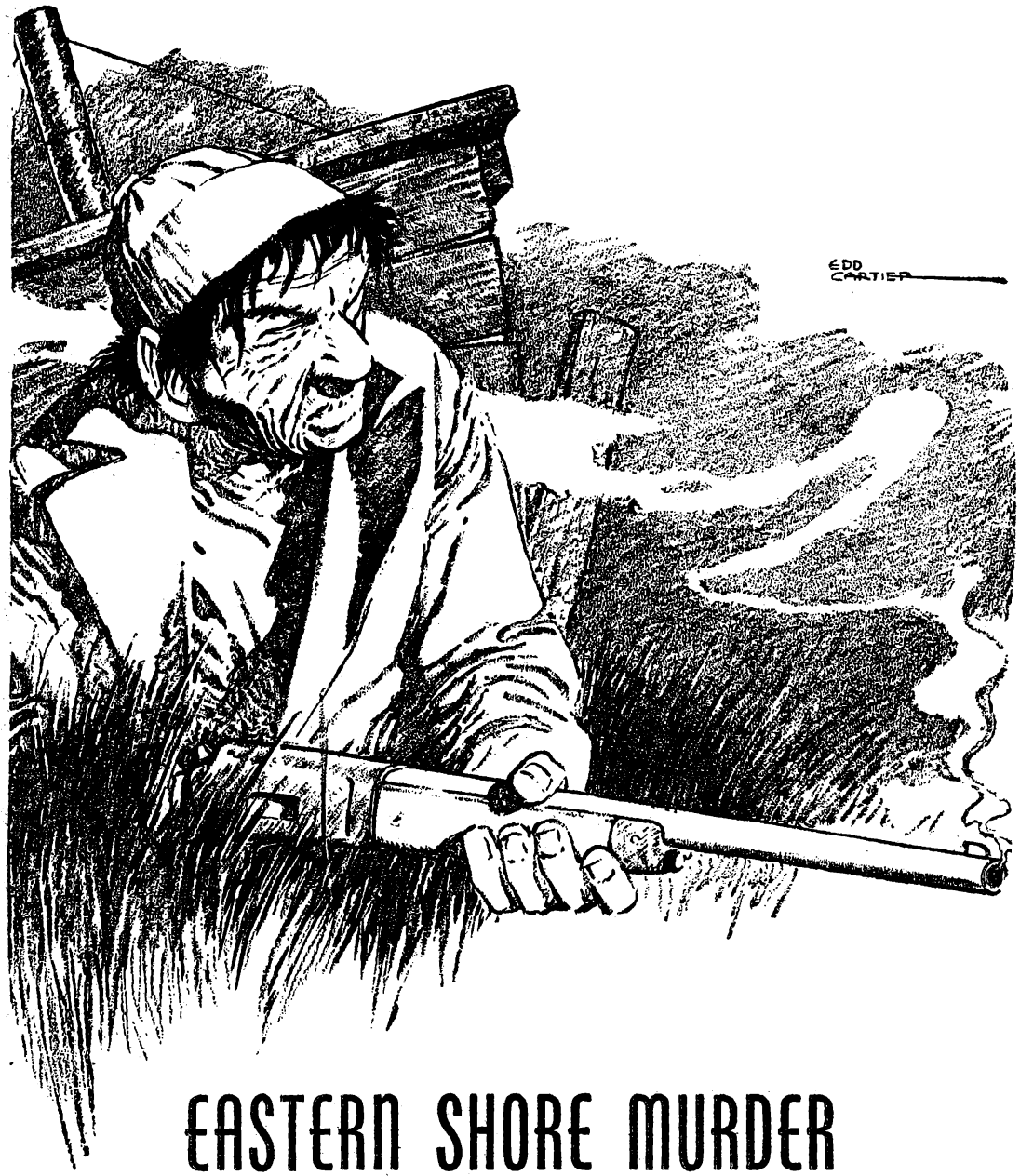

EASTERN SHORE MURDER

By Ben Conlon

"Don't anybody move!" Truitt yelled. But there was no one there but a dead man!

The two men paddled slowly, almost soundlessly, through the shallow swamp water. They were practically invisible in the pre-dawn darkness; the dull-brown of their leather hunting jackets blended perfectly with the rank marsh grass as they hunched low in the light skiff.

The tall man in the rear of the skiff ceased rowing, momentarily,

to listen. Only the never-ending clamor of the frogs reached his ears. The little man in front turned back to him and spoke in a low voice. "Reckon we're right close now, Mr. Truitt."

The tall man grunted. The other's knowledge of the swamp was uncanny. They moved forward again.

In a few minutes the skiff bumped against something solid.

This heah must be it," the little man whispered. "Firm land's right scarce, round heah."

The two got out of the skiff and found themselves on one of the tiny islets that dot Maryland's Eastern Shore swamp. They picked their way cautiously through the underbrush.

Charlie Truitt, the tall man, managed to keep the other man in front of him. It was more a matter of eternal vigilance than any specific mistrust. This little fellow, Semmes Carey, was without doubt what he represented himself to be—a swamp guide for duck hunters. He was shabby, gaunt and weatherbeaten, and his hands were calloused from the manual labor he did when the guide business slowed off. He couldn't very well be mixed up in the profitable racket that Truitt had come here to try to break up.

Working under cover, Truitt was a special agent for the Federal game commission. He had been sent to Maryland to break up a ring of illegal market hunters whose wanton slaughter of wild fowl was leading to the eventual extermination of the breed on the Eastern Shore.

Posing as a salesman who, finding himself in wild-duck country, wanted to bag the legal limit of birds, Truitt had spent four days in the little town, trying to get a lead on the gang. He had mixed in poker games, had gone into drinking bouts, more as a matter of business than pleasure, had done all the things he should have done—and had got nowhere. Then he had run across Semmes Carey, the little guide who apparently nursed a genuine hatred of the market hunters.

While guiding a party a couple of nights before, Semmes Carey claimed, he had seen smoke coming from a previously unoccupied shack on one of the swamp islets. It might possibly be a hide-out of the gang. So, in desperation, Truitt had taken Carey into his confidence. If he were wrong, he might just as well chuck the whole thing and go back to Washington. Once an under-cover man's identity becomes known, his usefulness is at an end.

With a .38 Special gripped in his right hand and a pocket flashlight in the other, Truitt kept on the heels of the guide. They reached the door of the dark shack. Carey sprang ahead with the speed of a snake, smashed the flimsy door open.

Truitt swung the beam from the flash in a wide arc about the room. "Don't anybody move!" he yelled.

Nobody moved. Nobody was there. Nobody, that is, except the dead man on the army cot.

And the man *was* dead, there could be no doubt of that. His body was rigid. His face was frozen in a terrible expression of agony. His shirt was in tatters; and through the rips, Truitt could see deep gashes, caked with blood. Parts of the soles of the feet were charred black and dotted with horrible-looking blisters.

"G-gosh!" Carey gulped, and held his hand to his mouth. He reeled out of the cabin into the dawn air.

After a moment, Truitt called Carey back, and the little guide came in, looking a little scared.

"G-gosh!" he choked. "What

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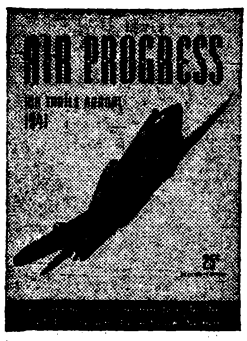

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could 'a' happened to him?"

"Tortured!" Truitt told him. "Those black spots and blisters on the soles of his feet were caused by burning cigarettes."

A shudder passed through the little guide. "Hope you don't think I'm a sissy," he said. "I've seen dead men, men that's even been killed violent. But mostly it's been men killed by a clean bullet wound—none o' this city-gangster stuff that's wrote about in the newspapers."

"Know him?" Truitt asked.

Carey forced himself to look at the body; he started to shake his head, then looked again.

"Why, it . . . it looks like Lew Holt!" he exclaimed.

"Who's Lew Holt?"

"Pete Holt's brother. Pete owns the Shore Tavern back in town—an' a lot of other things."

"I know about Pete Holt," Truitt said. "What about Lew Holt?" He was almost certain he had heard that name before.

"Well, Lew Holt was a bad un," Carey told him. "Pete's no angel, but Lew—he was the worst. He was always gettin' into trouble around heah. Then, a few years back, he started to hold up banks. The law finally ketched him an' sent him to prison. I read where he escaped some time ago, but I reckon he'd been better off if he hadn't."

Truitt recalled the story then. Lew Holt had become quite notorious as a result of his daring lone-wolf holdups. The cops had got him, finally. But there was a matter of some thirty thousand dollars which had never been recovered. Lew Holt had claimed he spent it; but the authorities never believed him.

"Well, what we doin' about it?" Carey asked.

Truitt shook his head. "We're doing just exactly nothing, except to go back to town and report this

to the regular police. I'm out of it. Murder, you see, is not a Federal offense. This is a case of—"

"Listen!" The guise whirled toward the door.

For several seconds, Truitt heard nothing. Then he caught it—the rhythmic swish of a paddle.

"G-gosh! Mebbe we got somethin' heah!" Carey said. "Right funny!"

He ran out of the shack, brought up his gun and blasted a shot into the gloom. The mysterious paddler had already landed, it seemed, for Truitt heard someone scooting back through the tall grass and seconds later—before Carey's second shot ripped out—heard the quick, receding splash of a paddle.

Truitt ran up beside Carey. "Don't be too ready to shoot there, chum," he said sourly. "That might have been some innocent duck hunter. He get away?"

Carey nodded. "He sure did. An' if you want him, you can go after him alone. Probably snoopin' low down in his skiff, ready to fire back at our flashes an'— *Say!"*

The guide's keen eyes seemed to bore through the darkness. He took two strides toward the long grass and picked up a hat. He looked it over, handed it to Truitt. "Folks over heah don't sport things like this."

Truitt backed away from the edge of the swamp and examined the hat in the light of his flash. It was a gray Homburg, new and of an expensive make. There was a bullet hole through the crown of it.

"Some tenderfoot duck hunter, I'll bet," Truitt said. "And you damned near got him, which might have been a big mistake. Remember, from now on, you do the guiding; I'll do the shooting, if any. Let's take another gander at that body."

They returned to the shack. Truitt gauged that the man had been dead for several hours, possibly for most of the night.

"Nothing we can do," the government man said. "Let's go back—"

He stopped and pointed at a pile of oddly-rigged nets. His gray eyes reflected renewed interest.

"Aren't those contraptions—"

"—bird traps," Carey cut in. "They set 'em up in the swamp on stilts an' lay a bait. Birds can get in all right, but the net's rigged so they can't get out. One o' them nets'll trap coupla hundred birds at a time."

"This puts a new face on it!" Truitt exclaimed. "I guess this *is* up my alley, after all. This bootleg racket becomes a Federal offense when the birds are carried across a State line. This fellow certainly must have been mixed up in the racket, with someone else fronting for him, of course, to market the stuff. I'll just take a look around."

He did. He found nothing further of interest except a pair of brown suède gloves, lying under a box in the corner. "Hm-m-m!" he said. The pinky and index fingers of the right-hand glove were padded with some sort of cotton. Truitt took another look at the corpse.

"Didn't belong to this fellow," he said. "Who do you know around here, Carey, that has two fingers missing on his right hand?"

Semmes Carey seemed sullen. "Listen heah," he said, "you're a detective. But I ain't. I'm just a guide. I gotta make a livin' in these parts. I can't be makin' enemies by doin' any guesswork."

"Come on, Carey," Truitt said sharply. "Evidently, you know who it is. Out with it."

Carey fidgeted. "Well—an' keep my name out o' this—Pete Holt had an accident huntin' ducks over heah, couple years ago. He lost a coupla fingers. Folks don't notice it much 'cause he usually wears gloves or keeps his hand hid. But the fingers is gone, all right. I'd always reckoned, though, that Pete Holt, tough as he is, wouldn't stoop to murder."

"Opinions," Truitt said, "don't count for anything when they're stacked up against evidence. Look, Carey, you'll have to report this to the cops. Leave my name out of it for the present. Don't mention the gloves or anything about the man that owned this hat; I want to find out where he figures into this picture. For all this, you get an extra fifty bucks. O. K.?"

"Fifty bucks is fifty bucks," Carey said.

They wasted no time paddling out of the swamp; and when they reached the landing, they separated. Truitt set out alone for Horner's hunting lodge, where he had taken a room.

In front of the lodge, another car was parked beside Truitt's coupé. The Federal man recognized the short, plump, bespectacled man beside it—Bill Horner, the proprietor.

Horner looked up from the 20-gauge shotgun he was cleaning.

"Why, it's Mr. Truitt—the salesman," he said. "How's business?" His narrow glance flicked over Truitt's leather jacket. "Been huntin'? Any luck?"

Truitt shook his head. "Nope. Sent my guide back with my gun. Not a sign of a bird. Starting out yourself, eh?"

"Betcha!" Horner went back to cleaning his gun.

As Truitt drove off, he saw, through his rear-view mirror, that the hotel man was watching him intently.

Pete Holt was a giant of a man, with a whiskey flush and little threadlike veins in the skin of his nose and cheeks. Heavy, dirty corduroys covered his great frame, and, as Carey had said, hs right hand was not in evidence. It was in his pocket. His left proved sufficient to pour the liquor that he seemed to be drinking freely. Truitt could easily believe that here was one man who might be capable of killing his own brother—or anyone else who stood in his way. There was an air of ruthlessness about the man. A tough guy to cross.

Truitt had waited until he was reasonably certain that Holt had heard the news of his brother's death before entering the tavern.

The government man stepped up to the bar and ordered a beer.

"Sorry to hear about Lew," he said.

"Sorry, huh?" Pete Holt looked up sneerily. "Why? *You* never knew him. You ain't got no business to be sorry, an' you *ain't* sorry. You're just makin' talk. You just heard some gossipy folks talkin' about Lew—how he was a no-good so-an'-so."

He leaned over the bar. He glared. "Well, sure he was. So what? But he was my brother. An' we'll see if anyone can kill my brother an' get away with it over heah on the Eastern Shore."

Truitt sipped his beer. "Had you seen Lew recently?" he asked.

Pete Holt glared more than ever. "No, I hadn't 'seen him recently,'" he snapped, aping the stranger's accent. "What the hell is it to you, anyhow? You salesman are pretty nosy folks, ain't you?"

"I suppose we have that reputation," Truitt conceded.

He finished his drink. Pete Holt was in a nasty mood, and Truitt didn't believe he'd get any real information out of the big man right now. He had decided to keep the matter of the gloves to himself until he had a chance to confer with the local deputy. He paid for his drink and walked out.

He went back to the lodge and climbed a flight of stairs to his room. He had decided to wash and have some breakfast. He was turning into the gloomy little corridor that led to his room when he heard the scuff of a shoe behind him. Before he could turn, the ceiling seemed to fall on his head! He passed out cold.

Charlie Truitt came to slowly and painfully. He heard a faint voice: "Take a snort o' this, Mr. Truitt."

He felt something poured down his throat. The fiery moonshine burned all the way down, but it made Truitt cough and open his eyes. Bill Horner, the proprietor, was bending over him, with a bottle in his hand.

"What happened?" Horner asked solicitously. "You seemed to have gotten a bad rap on the head."

"Yeah, seemed to," Truitt said crustily. "What are you doing here, Horner? I thought you'd gone hunting."

"I was fixin' to start out," Horner told him. "But before I got away, a man came racin' up Arundel Street and told me that Semmes Carey, the guide, found Lew Holt's body in a shack over in the swamp. So I didn't go. Murder's more excitin' than duck huntin'. Y'see, we get a right lot o' duck huntin' around heah, but not often a murder. We're sort o' law-abidin' folks, over heah on the Shore."

He managed to get Truitt to his feet. "I came in an' was tryin' to get the editor of our county weekly on the phone when I heard somethin' flop hard up heah. I ran up, an' it was you, knocked out. I'll help you into your room an' get hold o' Dr. Dessez. He lives right heah at the lodge. He'll fix you up. Yes, indeedy."

Truitt was helped into his room and flopped on the bed. Horner went to the telephone and made a call. Within a couple of minutes a talk, dark young man, carrying a medical kit, came into the room.

"This is Dr. Dessez," Horner said. "Mr. Truitt, one of our guests, got a bad bump on the head, doctor."

The good-looking young man set down his bag. "Lots of excitement in town today. Just got a call that Holt killed himself."

Horner shook his head. "You got it wrong, doc. He didn't kill himself. Semmes Carey found him over in a swamp shack—murdered."

"Yes, I heard about that," the young physician said. "But I mean Pete Holt! Pete went into the back room of his place a few minutes ago and put a bullet through his brain. The deputy thinks he may have killed his brother for some money he had, then got remorseful and shot himself."

Charlie Truitt got up off the bed. "Can you make this fast, doctor?" he said. "I want to get around to Pete Holt's place right away."

There was a big crowd massed near the entrance of Pete Holt's Shore Tavern, and a hot, perspiring special officer was having his hands full keeping folks from stampeding into the place.

Truitt pushed his way through

the crowd. He drew the deputy aside, flashed his game-commission badge.

"The name's Truitt," he said. "Here on a government case. I think this has something to do with it."

The deputy eyed him oddly. "What's it got to do with it, an' what's the case?"

Truitt said: "The case is confidential for the present. And I want to get a look at that body."

The deputy grunted. "Well, if that's all, go ahead in an' ask Sheriff Sykes. He's in there lookin' over the suicide."

Sheriff Sykes was a thickset, toad-like man who smelled faintly of corn whiskey. Three or four big shots of the town were in the back room of the tavern with him. Evidently, he didn't have many moments of glory and was making the most of this one. He nodded when Truitt showed him his card, but he kept on taking notes.

Truitt took a look at Pete Holt, lying prone on the floor of his back room, a pearl-handled revolver clutched in his right hand. There was a little hole in his right temple, and the powder burns proved that the bullet had been fired at very close range. Truitt knelt down beside the corpse.

"You can't touch that body till the coroner comes," Sykes told him.

"I'm not touching it," Truitt said. "Anybody hear the shot?"

"Sure! Couple of fellows that were in the bar. They ran in an' found him just like he is—alone."

Truitt said nothing. He got up and walked over to the room's only window. The window was small, set high in the wall. Standing on his toes, Truitt could look out into a narrow alley. He noticed that the dust on the pane had been disturbed recently.

"Haw!" Sykes scoffed. "A good-sized mosquito could hardly get through that. You're not tryin' to make anythin' but suicide out of this, are you?"

Truitt nodded. "I am, yes. I've never seen an unconscious man yet who was able to put a bullet through his own head."

There was dead silence for several seconds. Then the sheriff said: "What you mean?"

"Take a look at the back of his head."

"Hell! I did. A bump there. Probably hit his head on somethin' when he fell."

"On what?"

"Why, uh—" The sheriff was becoming slightly flustered.

"No," Truitt said, "there was nothing to fall against, here in the center of this room, but the wooden floor. He was a heavy man; but just a fall on a wooden floor wouldn't have made a bump like that on his head."

Sikes gulped. "Well, we don't go in for murder much over here. Reckon mebbe you got more experience in these things."

"Possibly," Truitt said. "But, listen, sheriff, you and I are trying to do exactly the same thing—get to the truth of this. It's murder. Holt was knocked out, then shot so it would look like suicide. And whoever did it went out through that window."

The sheriff suddenly seemed to recall something. His face brightened. "Say! I wonder!"

"What!"

"Well, somebody told me a little while ago that there was a fella hangin' around here this mornin'—some stranger, dressed like a city fella; didn't have any hat on, and awful skinny. Was thinkin' he

might've been skinny enough to get through this window."

Truitt thought back to the mysterious swamp prowler. "No hat, eh?" he said. "Well, that's interesting."

His glance happened to fall on the desk in the corner of the room. He stared for several seconds, then walked over. He looked hard at the pair of brown suède gloves lying on the desk. They looked like the identical pair that he had found in the swamp shack.

Truitt's hand went to his own pocket where he had put the gloves he'd found in the swamp. They were gone—taken, undoubtedly, when Truitt had been knocked out in the corridor of the hotel.

"Ready to go, sheriff?" Truitt said. "I want to have a little talk with you."

It took a lot of persuasion on Truitt's part to get Sykes to sanction his plan, but the sheriff finally gave in.

"But you'd better be right, mister," Sykes warned him as they parted. "Federal man or not."

Back at the lodge, Truitt found Semmes Carey, the shabby little guide, talking with a bunch of hangers-on. Bill Horner, the proprietor, was in the group. "Hi, Mr. Truitt," Horner greeted. "How's the sellin' game?"

Truitt didn't answer. His identity seemed to be about as much of a secret as the Grand Canyon. He caught Semmes Carey's eye and motioned him to wander down the street after him.

A moment later, as Truitt stood looking in at a display of guns in a hardware-store window, Carey slouched along and joined him.

"Listen, Carey," Truitt said. "What do you know about Bill Horner? He was around, awfully convenient, when I was slugged up

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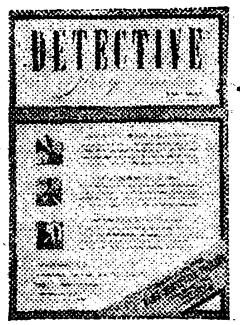

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near my room. What's his reputation around here?"

"Oh, I don't know much about him," Carey answered. "He drinks a good deal, lives well, always seems to be well supplied with money. Why?"

"Oh, nothing! But Pete Holt wasn't a suicide. Pete was murdered! We'll know who did it, by tomorrow morning. Sheriff Sykes is getting a fingerprint expert from Baltimore. There's prints all over the windowpane where the killer made his escape.

"Another thing, Carey, if you notice a tall, rail-thin guy around town, someone that looks like he's from the city, don't say anything. He's probably the fellow you shot at over in the swamp. Things are due to blow off in this town before tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, keep mum on everything I've told you."

"Talkin' ain't my big point," Carey said.

Truitt met Sheriff Sykes in front of Pete Holt's tavern at ten o'clock that night. They kept in the shadow of the building to avoid being seen along the street. Pete Holt's body had been removed to the local undertaker's and the tavern was closed and dark.

"You all set?" Truitt asked. "Think you can keep awake?"

Sykes laughed. "Damn right! If anythin' gets by me, it'll have to have wings."

"O. K.! Watch the alley in back, and I'll wait inside. If anyone comes, you wait until he gets inside or up on that window; then take him from behind. That way we get him both ways."

The sheriff nodded, turned over the proper keys, and left. Truitt unlocked the front door to Pete Holt's bar. He went in, shining his pocket torch in front of him until he got to the back room. He settled himself on the floor in a corner and heard Sykes outside, cat-footing it along the alley.

An hour later Truitt was still in the corner, waiting restlessly. He wanted a smoke but didn't dare take one because he had no idea when things would start happening. He hadn't heard any movement from Sykes for an hour, either. He hoped the sheriff had not fallen asleep.

Then his restlessness suddenly left him and he was sitting up, every sense strained! There had been an almost imperceptible scratching noise from the front of the bar. Truitt hadn't expected action from that side, but someone was trying a key in the front door.

Truitt heard the door swing open with a little creak, then heard the latch click as it was shut again. He was on his feet, now, waiting by the back-room door. The rattle of a loose board indicated the intruder's progress toward the rear.

The government man let the intruder get into the room before he clicked on his flash.

"Just hold that!"

The man whirled, and Truitt saw that he was tall and very thin and hard-looking. "If you move a step," Truitt said, "I'll—"

The thin man leaped then. There was a gun in his hand, and he swung it in a wide arc at Truitt. Truitt closed with him, got the other's gun arm and twisted sharply. The gun dropped and they went to the floor in a tangle.

The thin man was incredibly strong. He got long lean fingers in Truitt's throat and started to bang his head on the floor.

Truitt knew he couldn't take much of that. His hands groped around on the floor, found the gun. He drew it back as far as he could and clubbed it down on the thin man's temple. He had to use it twice before the other let loose, and once more for the final K. O. That thin fellow was mighty tough.

Truitt got weakly to his feet. It was then that he heard the struggle out in the alley. He could hear the sheriff's heavy breathing and someone else fighting to get away.

Suddenly there was a shot and a muffled oath by Sykes, followed by the sound of running feet.

Truitt leaped to the window and chinned himself up. He saw Sykes leaning heavily against the wall, holding a hand to his shoulder, and could just make out the dim figure of a man running down the street.

Suddenly, Sykes straightened up. He wabbled as he fired three quick shots. Then he collapsed on his face.

The window was too small to let Truitt through, so he went out the front way and raced around into the alley. Sykes was unconscious, and Truitt ran along down the alley. He almost stumbled over a prone form.

Truitt turned over the form and stared into the pain-contorted face of Semmes Carey.

"You're . . . right smart, Truitt," Carey gasped. "Smarter'n I reckoned. An' heah I figured *I* was so smart!"

"A killer is never smart, Carey," Truitt said. "You just stacked the cards against yourself. You overacted, there in that shack, pretending to be sick and scared in the presence of the very man you had tortured and murdered."

A sickly grin spread over Carey's gaunt face. "So you doped that out, too, did you? Well, I know I'm dyin'. There won't be no trial an' execution for me."

"Maybe not," Truitt said. "You worked your own execution, very efficiently. You were smart in a way, yet your second murder—the murder of Pete Holt—tied you up tight with the first one. Carey, you were in on that bootlegging racket yourself, weren't you?"

Carey managed another sickly grin. "Reckon it ain't gettin' me nowhere to deny it, now. I was doin' pretty well for myself till Lew Holt came back an' hid out over there. Me an' Pete Holt—the head o' the racket—was fair friendly. But when Lew came back—well, it was a case o' brothers against me. Both of 'em ordered me to go back to slim pickin's as a guide—or else!

"I got danged tired o' their high-an'-mighty goin's on. I got the jump on Lew. I slugged him. I reckoned he had some o' that thirty thousand dollars hid somewhere, an' I tried to torture it out o' him. But I didn't get a red cent o' the money."

"Too bad you couldn't have made better use of your smartness," Truitt said. "For you *were* smart, Carey." The vanity of the little guide, even a few minutes away from death, was apparent, and Truitt continued to play on it. "You had to have an alibi for Lew's murder. You arranged things so that *I* would stumble across the murder. You planted the crime on Pete Holt, then let *me* come across the evidence.

"You just had to kill Pete Holt then. With Pete dead, and able to offer no alibi for the gloves, he would have gone down on the records as the killer of his brother. And you would have been safe. It was a smooth trick trying to make it look like suicide, too—remorse on the

part of Pete for killing his brother. But why did you slug me, at the hotel, and take those gloves from me? And why did you leave them after you?"

"It was a right big mistake, Truitt." Carey was talking more jerkily now, his voice was growing faint. "Since I was goin' to kill Pete anyhow, I figured I'd blackmail him first. Pete had . . . lotta dough. I told him he was in . . . tough spot, that innocent or not, he'd have a hell of a time explainin' away them gloves. I offered to sell him back the gloves—at a stiff figure. He got tough . . . pulled his gun. I was quicker'n he was. I slugged him, fixed the suicide set-up with his own gun . . . got out the window fast. Too damned fast! I didn't have time to take the gloves with me. But, say, 'fore I die, there's one thing I'd like to know. Was there really any fingerprints on that window?"

Truitt shook his head. "No! No prints. That was for your benefit."

"Dang it! I sorta suspicioned that, but . . . couldn't take a chance. I had to git back an' rub them fingerprints off."

A crowd had now gathered about Truitt and the wounded man. But Semmes Carey died before he could be carried away.

Truitt was reading an identification card that the tall, thin man had handed him:

Lieutenant Lawrence MacGrath
Maryland State Police
Baltimore, Md.

"You know, I had a hunch it might be something like this," Truitt said. "You were over here tailing Lew Holt. Right?"

McGrath nodded. "That's right. I had a tip he might hole up over in the swamp. But when I got out there and a bullet took the hat off my head, I scrammed. I figured I was on the right track, then. I didn't know how many I might be up against; so, instead of being too much of a hero, I came back to town to try to round up some sort of a sheriff's posse."

"Then why didn't you?" Sykes challenged. The sheriff—his shoulder wound bandaged—was making the most of being a figure about the town.

"Before I could get to you," McGrath explained, "the news came that Lew Holt was found murdered over there. That was a new case to work on; so I decided to play things lone wolf until I found out the score. I laid low during the day; but when I saw Truitt let himself into the tavern with a set of keys, I used my own skeleton keys to go in and investigate."

"But what about that dough Lew was supposed to have?" Sykes asked. "Where does that come in."

Truitt chuckled. "It doesn't come in. I found papers proving that Pete Holt, who was holding the dough for his brother, Lew, took it and sunk it in the duck-bootlegging racket. He was in a swell spot, as a tavernkeeper, to make contacts for marketing the birds."

McGrath rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I got a swell crack on the noggin out of it all," he said. "But since the case is cleaned up, I guess we're even, eh, Truitt?"

"No," Truitt told him. "Not quite. I owe you one gray Homburg hat that my guide put a bullet through. Don't forget that."

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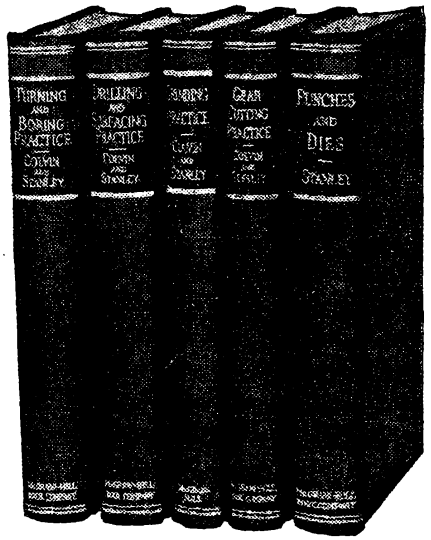

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MESSENGER OF DEATH

By Carter H. Holland

Double thought there might be a story when he saw the man stumble into the post office. And the story was murder!

In a voice that sounded hollow and desperate, he asked the clerk for a stamped envelope. I stood behind him and thought that sometime or other he must have had a set-to with a concrete mixer.

The left side of the man's face was a mass of blue-red lumpy flesh, his eye was gone. Where the ear should have been was a ridge of flabby skin. His left shoulder was much lower than his right, and, instead of taking strides, he slid his feet over the floor to the glass-top table.

I got a book of three-cent stamps

and followed him. While my fingers fumbled to tear a stamp from the book, I watched him lean heavily on the table, scribbling. His breath made a gurgling sound in his throat. He seemed to fight for each lung of air.

The stamp book slipped from my hands to the floor. I stooped to pick it up and saw a crimson thread trickle from under his trouser cuff and snake over his shoe to the floor. As I straightened, he gave a horrible cry and slumped sideways against me! His one eye danced madly, the color drained from his face. He was more grotesque than before.

I felt the envelope pushed into my hand and heard him mumble something which I couldn't understand. His other hand pressed a bill at me. I took it and let him down on the floor, easy. Words were on my lips to question him when he gave a gasp and spread to the seams of his suit. He was dead!

Strong fingers wrapped my arms and swung me around. I was swept over the floor, then bounced against the marble wall in an empty corner of the post office! A stocky man held a beefy hand against my chest. His eyes made me think of a snake. A much younger man gripped my right arm. His eyes shifted from side to side and his mouth twitched nervously.

"Let's have it, quick!" the stocky man rasped at me.

"Cut the rough stuff," I snapped at him. Then I added: "Who are you, anyway?"

"You're not chiseling in on us," he growled. "Give—quick!"

Shifty-eyes took a plier grip on my arm. I shook to free myself, saying, "Listen, you mugs. Don't you—"

I stopped talking abruptly. A gun pressed tight into my middle.

"C'mon, we've got no time to fool here. Watch him, Sam." The stocky guy wheeled me, and we moved down the corridor to the doorway.

To stall I said: "Do you guys know what you're pulling in a post office, a Federal building?"

Sam prodded his gun in my ribs and said out of the corner of his mouth: "Keep moving and shut up!"

I shut up and walked.

Outside the building, we crossed the street toward a parking lot. We probably looked like any three men walking abreast should look. They carried their right hands in coat pockets. I was between them with both hands hanging loose. In my vest pocket, underneath a buttoned

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double-breasted suit, I had the envelope and bill, which I'd slipped there as I was shoved along the floor.

I didn't know who the guy was that had died, or what these thugs were up to, but it did look to me like I'd cut myself into something big.

Sam used his shoulder to shove me from the street, over the curbing and start me walking westward on the sidewalk. "Car's at the end of the lot," he grunted.

We passed the main entrance which circled the parking-lot filling station and walked alongside a two-foot brick wall that separated the parking lot from the sidewalk. Cars in the lot nosed this wall. At the west end of the area was a narrow driveway for cars to pull in and park beside a dining car that stood with one end to the sidewalk. About three feet west of that diner was a second, set in the same position.

Ahead of us, a big beer truck pulled over the sidewalk and stopped beside the first diner. It filled the narrow drive, squeezing close to parked cars. Sam said: "Nuts! We can't cut through there. Let's hop the wall and go between the cars."

His partner grunted. Both men swerved me, the three of us facing the wall. In step we each raised a foot. I put the instep of my shoe to the edge of the bricks and straightened my leg. At the same instant I stabbed hard at their shoulders. Both men pitched forward and floundered helplessly between the parked cars.

I pivoted and sprinted west, ducked between the two diners to lose myself among the cars in the parking lot. Midway through, I saw a garbage can rack blocking my passage. I spun on my heels to backtrack. Sam popped around the end of the car, his hand tugging at his gun pocket. That was all I saw of him. Somehow, I got myself up on the roof of the car next to the parking lot. I heard the whine of lead and saw splinters chopped from the car around me.

I crossed the roof of the car in nothing flat, gave a short leap and landed on top of beer cases in the truck. Sam's crazy shooting brought a cop bearing down from the corner. I decided to ride the truck away. I reached and pulled the tarpaulin over me.

The truck shoved along for what I thought was a couple of blocks before I dug into my vest pocket for the envelope and crumpled bill. I pushed back the tarpaulin a crack to let in some light and looked at the bill. Cold pimples raced up my spine. It was a thousand-dollar note.

The envelope bore the address:

Miss Helen Winkle
Apt. 68, Hudson Arms
City

I eased myself as best I could on the bottles and ripped the envelope open. All that was in it was a money-order form, and that wasn't filled out. Instead, it showed a roughly sketched building. Actually, there was only about three fourths of a building, because the lower part tapered off. It was a two-story building with two windows above, and the upper part of two windows and a door below. Under the drawing was a capital R. Three strokes of the pen made a chimney; from it, lines spiraled to represent smoke. I tore the paper into fine bits and floated them from me.

"Nuts!" I thought. *"Someone is screwy."*

The truck pulled to the curb, and I watched the driver go inside a tavern. I swung to the cab top and sat down, then slid off onto the hood and hopped to the pavement. I didn't think anyone saw me.

The Hudson Arms is one of those apartments that has a fountain in the lobby. A gorgeous blonde was behind the desk. She lifted big blue eyes to me, questioning, her lips parted in a broad smile. I stopped her with a wave of the hand and kept going toward the elevator. The automatic car was up, and I had to wait. Water gurgled from an urn on the shoulder of a statue in the middle of the fountain. I looked at it, then stared across the lobby at the blonde, speculating as to the attractiveness of Miss Winkle.

The elevator doors opened, and I took the lift to the sixth floor.

The door to Apartment 68 stood ajar, just a crack. I squinted but couldn't see inside. I ignored the pearl buzzer button and crowded the door half open with several sharp knuckle raps. I saw a taupe rug and a blue-covered lounge. On the rug, from behind the end of the lounge, were the bare feet and ankles of a person I thought to be a girl. I gulped a few times, then tiptoed into the apartment, whispering a call: "Miss Winkle!"

The feet and ankles did belong to a girl, a very pretty girl. She wore only a flimsy dressing gown. She lay on her back, great brown eyes staring at the ceiling. A bullet had smashed through her side, just below the heart, and blood made a crimson, ragged pattern over the

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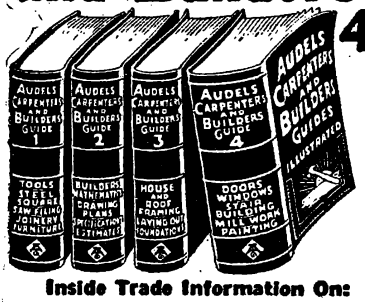
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rug. The girl was dead!

I backed to the telephone stand.

I had the telephone to my ear when a woman's voice sounded.

"Put it down!"

I thought the voice came through the telephone and held on. When it repeated I peered toward the doorway. A girl stood there. She leveled a snub-nosed automatic at me.

I dropped the phone into the cradle, faced her with arms to my side, palms forward. She stepped quickly to me and stuck the gun in my stomach.

I was getting fed up with guns and bottles sticking in me.

"What the hell you doing here?" she asked.

I explained by a nod of my head over my shoulder toward the dead girl on the floor.

She darted a glance following my direction. A softness swept across her face. She spun from me and for just a second dropped to one knee beside the dead girl. Hate crossed her face. At arm's length, she jabbed the gun ahead of her and sprang toward me. I waltzed backward a few steps.

Her voice, a near whisper, cut deep into the apartment stillness. "I'll kill you for this!"

I watched the knuckles of her gun hand lose color. I wondered if I should leap the few feet between us and bring her down with a tackle or take my chances trying to outtalk her.

Trembling with rage, she screamed: "You killed Helen! You're in with Pete and Sam. You lousy murdering chiseler, I'm going to kill you even if I burn for it!"

I didn't doubt her intent. My life was measured by minutes—seconds. I tightened my muscles to spring and tackle her.

A voice I recognized growled: "Put down that gun, Ruth. This guy knows where the money is."

Sam and the stocky man, Pete,

swung across the room. I saw Sam twist the gun from the girl as Pete swung at me. I rode the blow, but it floored me. I clamped my teeth, drawing myself together to rise. Sam started kicking my ribs, viciously! The pain of the blows gradually left me, I felt myself drift into unconsciousness.

I found myself lying on the lounge. It was an effort to lift my eyelids. Faintly, I saw the feet of the dead girl on the floor, at the other end of the lounge. Sam and Pete were sitting near the table across the room. Ruth leaned against the door which led into the kitchenette. With her left hand, she held a clear glass pitcher of water.

"Shall I give him another?" she asked the men.

Both men came to me. I opened my eyes wide. My body screamed in pain. I put my hands up to my bursting head. It was wet. My collar and tie were soaked. Sam bundled the lapels of my coat in his scrawny hands and pulled me up to a sitting position.

"That's just a sample of what you'll get if you don't come clean," Sam yelled at me. "We found the thousand-dollar bill Lug gave you. Where's the note we saw him write?"

At the mention of Lug, my brain snapped back to normal. The girl slid into a chair, crossed her legs. "You fellows get him talking" she said.

The set-up paraded across my mind. Lug was Jimmie Randall, who a few years ago had every banker in the Midwest terrorized. His gang of killers had grabbed off thousands. The newspapers had reported Lug killed by his gang for holding out their share of loot. Not long after that killing, the gang had been broken up. Some of the members were killed by the police, those captured either got time or the chair.

The man who had died in the post office had been Lug. That accounted for his mutilated face and stooped, limping form. He had been shot to pieces and left to die. In some manner, he had lived and connected with this bunch. Sam slapped my face.

I said: "Maybe we can make a deal."

Sam scowled and said: "Listen, punk, you can't cut in on us. You know where Lug hid his money, and you're going to tell us here and now!" He whipped his gun on me.

Pete sprang and whirled Sam across the room. "Cut it out!" he snapped. "We could have gotten it out of Lug if you hadn't gotten a nervous finger—then rubbed out Helen. This guy is our last chance, haven't you any brains?"

Ruth's face turned chalky. Snarling, she jumped, clawing, onto Sam. "So you killed Helen! I'll kill you for that!"

Pete cuffed her face, hard. She sprawled to the floor. "Stop it!" he shouted.

Ruth, her mouth curled, crawled to her feet. "Why'd he kill Helen? She wasn't in the room with you guys, not with only that dressing gown on she wasn't."

"Pipe down, Ruth, and quit arguing." Pete growled at her. "Sam was holding the gun on Lug. We were trying to make him talk. Sam got jittery and the gun went off. Helen was in the bedroom; then, before I knew what Sam was doing, he had ducked after Helen and shot her. She staggered out here and dropped dead on the floor. We rushed Lug to the Park Medical Building, but instead of going in to a doctor he crossed the street to the post office.

We tailed him and saw him slip this fellow a note and the bill we found on him. We've got to find out what was in that note, or we'll never get the money. Now pipe down, will you?"

Ruth said nastily: "You're both dumb and kill crazy. Make him talk and don't forget I cut a third; you're not blasting me out of my share."

Pete gave her a hard look and said to me: "What was in the note, punk?"

I blew the knuckles of my right hand and did some hard and fast thinking. "I tore it up," I said. "All that was in the envelope was a money order form and on it was a big R." I purposely forgot about the sketch of the house.

"Rosso!" the girl shouted. A person seeing smoke in a theater couldn't have been more excited.

"Yeah!" said Pete, licking his lips. "Why didn't I think of him? He's just the guy Lug would stash his money with!" He frowned at me and asked sharply: "What else was in that envelope!"

"Nothing," I said. I stared at him. trying to bluff.

"Get some sheets, Sam. Tie his arms to the chair. I'll stick a couple of matches under his fingernails and see what they make him tell us."

Sam went into the bedroom. Pete pulled a .38 and said to Ruth: "You help Sam tie him. We're going to hear something in a minute and I don't want you two getting funny ideas and run out ahead of me."

Sam came back in the room, dragging a couple of sheets. He looked at Pete, holding the gun; his lower lip started to twitch.

"I heard you," he said in a husky voice. "How do we know *you* won't run out on *us?*"

Sam plunged the sheets into Pete's face and stabbed out his hand for the gun. I vaulted to a vase on the table and swept it crashing down on Pete's head. He slumped to the floor. Sam smiled a silly grin at me. He fumbled for the gun Pete had dropped.

My fist crashed against Sam's skull, a short jab. It knocked him to the floor away from the gun. I bent over to pick up the gun, and Ruth jumped my back, bearing me down. We hit the floor heavy. I rolled and twisted from under her, the gun in my hand. Sam was back on his feet, his hand coming from under his armpit. The nose of an automatic brushed his coat lapel. I pressed the trigger of Pete's gun! Sam seemed to hang in midair a second, then slow-motioned to the floor. His body quivered and stretched still.

"We gotta get out of here," Ruth said. "Someone will phone the cops after all this noise." She moved close to me, her arm went up around my neck. "If we hurry, honey, there'll only be you and me to divide the money. Let's tie up Pete; we don't want him bothering us."

She was a hot number, no doubt about it. Hotter in more ways than one. She was playing the winner, and for the moment that looked like me.

I shook her off. Pete stirred on the floor. "I'm getting out of here," I said.

I reached to open the door as someone on the other side shoved it in my face. Two men crashed into the room, big men, cops. "What's the trouble in here?" one of them shouted.

I waved the gun at them and told them to stand close together with hands up high. My business was at Rosso's. It was their job to handle Ruth and Pete without me. Pete

crawled to his feet: "Whatta pal," he smiled at me. "C'mon, Ruth, our little playmate will handle the cops."

"Nothing doing!" I yelled at him. "Stand where you are or I'll let you have it!"

"No, pal," he sneered, pointing to the dead girl. "You've done enough killing for one day. Besides, you won't kill in front of cops." He shoved Ruth through the door and followed her, banging the door closed behind him.

I thought fast. "Get them!" I cried at the cops. I turned the gun and shoved the butt at them. One cop grabbed it while the other opened the door. Both men jumped into the hall. I dashed across the room into the kitchenette and through a door into the hall. It was the same hall that serves the apartment entrance. Next to the elevator was the stairway; from it, I could hear the cops pounding down after Pete and Helen. I followed to the second-floor fire escape and down it into the alley.

I figured Helen and Pete would get to Rosso's if they slipped the cops. Pete, in his few words and gesture, had fixed me before the cops as a murderer. I wanted a gun. There were too many of the wrong breed hanging around Rosso's for me to take a chance out there without one.

A gentle rain patted the pavement. I had my car parked on the street near the post office. I walked back to the post office.

All the windows were closed except the general-delivery window. There, I bought a stamped envelope and a special-delivery stamp. I wrote a note to the police. I dropped

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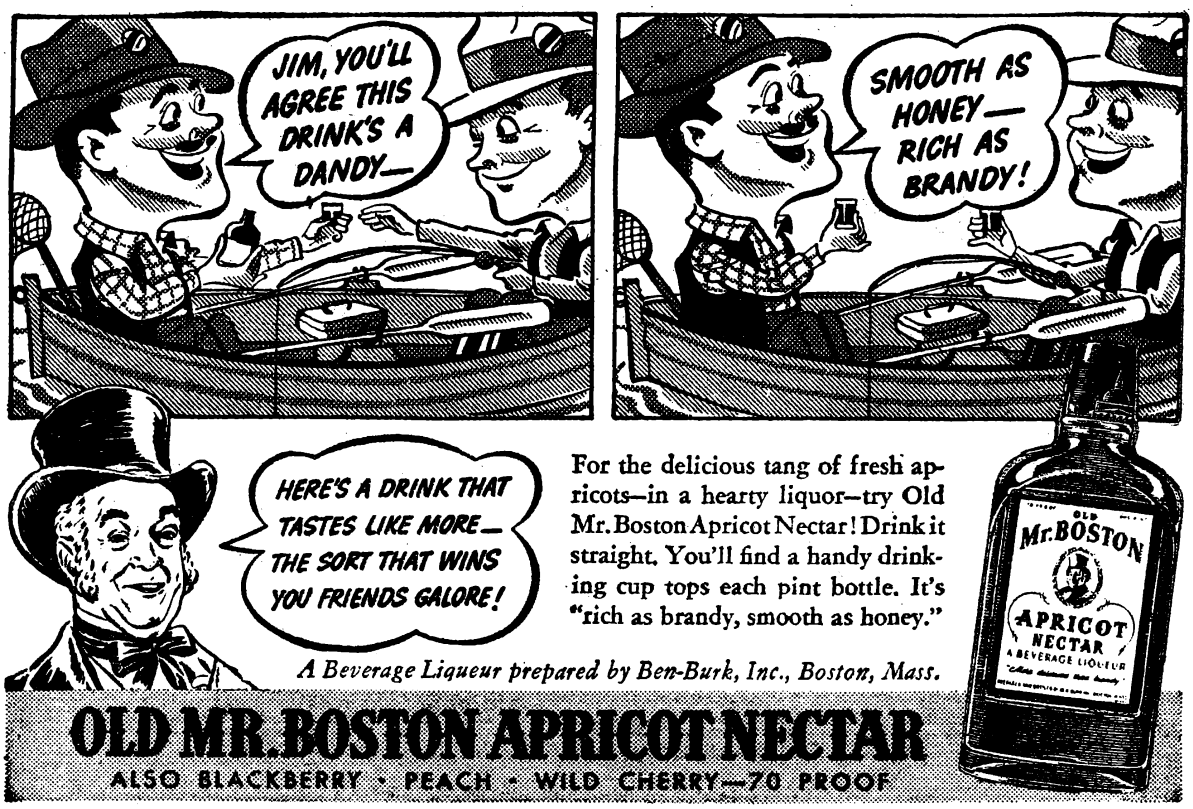
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it into the special-delivery slot and crossed the street to the parking-lot filling station.

I pushed into the building, acting as excited as I could. "Did you see that drunk?" I asked the attendant.

"I haven't seen anybody," he said in a bored voice. "What about him?"

"He staggered back to the cars," I said. "Probably a sneak thief, faking drunk. Get your gun; I'll show you."

Maybe I should have been an actor. He opened a drawer and pulled out a nickel-plated pistol. "We don't stand for stealing around here," he told me. "Lead me to him." He brightened up and grinned.

I angled him back behind cars, away from the searchlight on the station. Rounding the back of a car, I let him draw along side of me. I hated to do it—and pounded him alongside his head as easy as I could to get results. I held him from falling hard on the gravel while I took the gun from him.

It was too early for many customers to be around Rosso's. The place catered to the drinking and gambling trade that came late and stayed till sunrise. I asked the bartender where Rosso was, and he pointed to a door, upon which was a sign reading: PRIVATE. I opened the door and found a narrow, dimly lighted stairway leading down. I looked back at the bartender and put the same question to him again. He told me to go down to the first door to the right.

The first door to the right was wide open. It was an expensively furnished office. No one was in it. From behind a closed door, I could hear voices arguing. I recognized the voices of Pete and Helen, a strange voice I guessed to be that of Rosso.

I pulled the gun and kicked in the

door. Before me stood Pete and Helen and a short, heavy man. Pete spied me, jumped backward and stuffed his hand in his coat pocket.

"Take your hand out of your pocket—empty!" I shouted. "All of you, get together."

I heeled the door behind me and looked over the room. It was a basement storeroom. The light was poor, but I could make out a pile of tables and chairs piled next to the chimney.

Then a bolt of lighting struck me!

I came to on a chair with my hands tied together before me. The man I guessed to be Rosso was massaging my face and head, roughly, between his hands. I gave a grunt and told him to lay off.

Pete pushed Rosso aside. "We knew you'd beat the cops, too, pal," he said. "Now, do you want to talk, or do we have to start that bonfire?"

Rosso said: "It's in this room, but I don't know where. Every time Lug came out, he came to this room."

Their voices sounded distant through a buzzing in my head. I wondered how long I had been knocked out and how much longer it would be before the cops came. I blamed myself for not looking behind the door. I wet my lips and said: "I've told you all I know."

Pete drew a match from a box he had taken from his pocket and whittled one end to a sharp point. Rosso held up my tied hands while Pete jabbed the sharp end under my right thumbnail. I winced.

"The fire will hurt more," Pete taunted. "You going to talk?"

I was too busy combing my brain to answer him. He pressed the flame of a match to the stick under my nail, and I watched it spurt yellow.

"Not too late, pal," he jeered. "Spill it!"

I figured Pete was right. I had little to lose. They wouldn't kill me without learning where the money was hidden. A good fight would hold them till the cops arrived, and they should be along any minute, now.

I drove my right leg in between Pete's legs and threw myself onto the floor. My leg tripped him to the floor. I bounced to my feet and grabbed the chair with both hands. Furiously I swung that chair in a wide arc! It splintered against the heads and shoulders of the three men. Rosso went down, dragging Ruth with him. Pete closed in on me, weighing me to my knees. The thug, who had slugged me from behind the door, swung his fists onto my head. The room seemed to fill with exploding flash light bulbs. Through the blinding light I could make out the forms of men swarming into the room. Some were in uniform. All fisted guns.

I found myself holding my head in my hands, and I squeezed my eyelids tight to get hold of my sight. I shook my head and opened my eyes. Sergeant Ryan stood looking down at me. Several cops held guns on Pete and the others.

I heard the sergeant ask me, "What goes on, Double? We came as soon as we got your special; why didn't you phone us?"

The sergeant took my hand and helped me to a chair. I felt dizzy. My voice came from a dry mouth.

"I couldn't phone you," I said. "Pete, here, had me pegged as a murderer with a couple of your cops. I couldn't take a chance on being held or delayed while these birds

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were getting the money and making a getaway."

Ryan shrugged and said: "I don't get it. Start at the beginning."

"Well," I said, "if I'm right, you'll find, in the clean-out door of the chimney, a hoard of loot Jimmie Randall and his gang lifted from banks."

Comprehension swept the sergeant's face. He barked orders to his men.

I knew I was right the second one of the cops opened the door. It had been opened so many times, soot hadn't accumulated. A false floor hid a satchel full of greenbacks.

Then I explained things to the sergeant. Jimmie the Lug had lived after being taken for a ride by members of his own gang. He'd holed in with a bunch that planned to get the money for themselves, and each of that gang was scheming to get all of it. Concluding, I explained that, because the sketch of the building tapered off at the bottom, attention was directed to the top; the lines depicting smoke focused notice to the chimney. "Lug knew he was dying," I said, finishing off. "He wanted Helen to have the money and was trying to get word to her in such a way that the others couldn't horn in."

Ryan laughed. "Well, *you* sure horned into something, if you can get it to that sheet of yours in time for the next edition."

I thought there might be a story when I saw the fellow stumble into the post office. It was just a hunch. Certainly, I didn't know who he was, nor did I know I would be led into receiving a five-figure reward, with my boss throwing in a couple of weeks vacation for the best story the *News* had run in several years.

THE END.

CALLING ALL CARS!

By Robert C. Blackmon

Joe Hatchell awakened to hear the radio blaring a call for his arrest. For murder! And his buddy lay dead beside him!

Joe Hatchell, regular driver of Police Prowl Car 46, came awake slowly. He tried to swallow, and his tongue rasped dryly against the roof of his mouth. His lips felt parched and rough. He opened his eyes and saw the vague gray rectangle of the prowl-car windshield before him. Beyond the thick glass was the darkness of night. It matched the shad-

ows swirling in his brain.

He blinked slowly and tried to recall what had happened before the shadows came. Something had happened; he knew that. But he couldn't remember what the something was. His mind worked sluggishly. Thick brown brows met over his glazed blue eyes as he tried hard to think clearly.

Hazily, he remembered that he and Dick Bates, his side-kick on the prowl-car beat, had rolled into the alley behind Charlie's Place, a little eating joint down near the warehouse section, for their usual 10 p. m. cup of coffee. They had done it for weeks, since the weather had turned cold. Charlie always had good coffee.

Charlie brought the coffee out in paper cups, as he always did when the prowl-car horn beeped a signal in the alley.

The night was colder than usual, and he and Dick gulped the coffee. Charlie grinned with all of his fat, round face and said it was too cold out there for him; he went in the back door of his little joint. Then—

Joe Hatchell couldn't remember anything else!

He grunted, shook his head and winced as the movement started a throbbing pain in his temples. He grunted again as another idea came into his mind, and a sheepish grin pulled at the corners of his wide mouth. He chuckled a little, deep in his throat.

He had it! The heater in the prowl car and Charlie's hot coffee had made him drop off to sleep! That was a good one on him—asleep in an alley while on duty. That was sure good. Dick Bates would have a good joke on him, now.

"Hey, Dick!" He turned and grinned at the dark bulk of Dick Bates on the seat beside him in the gray darkness of the prowl car. "That's a good one on me, Dick. I—"

He stopped talking, and the grin broadened on his chunky, weather-reddened face. He chuckled again, louder.

Dick Bates' big hulk was slumped down, his head hanging over the seat back, his mouth wide open. His left arm was slack at his side. Dick Bates was dead to the world. Dick was asleep!

"Hey, Dick!"

Grinning broadly, Joe Hatchell caught Bates' left shoulder and shook him, hard.

"Hey, wake up, Dick! You can't go to sleep on—"

His voice chopped off abruptly. The grin left his mouth and his lips pinched into a straight line. Cropped brown hair seemed to stir beneath his dark-blue uniform cap. All of the glassiness left his eyes, and he could feel his cheeks stiffen.

Moved by his rough shaking, Dick Bates' big hulk slid sideways, toward the right-hand door of the prowl car. His head rolled around on an entirely limp neck. His uniform cap fell off and dropped into his lap.

His chin went down, and the weight of his bowed head seemed to pull him forward, toppling toward the steel dash of the prowl car.

As Bates' head moved, Joe Hatchell saw his eyes; and sudden realization struck him with the force of a physical blow. Dick Bates wasn't asleep. His eyes were wide open and staring!

Frantically, Joe Hatchell thrust out his left arm, trying to keep Bates from ramming his head into the dash. For a split moment, he thought Dick Bates was sick; then

his fingers clutched thick uniform fabric over Bates' chest and a sticky warmness smeared his hand. The sticky warmness was blood! Joe Hatchell had felt coagulating blood before.

Momentarily, he was stunned, his mind too shocked to function. Then his senses were working at top speed. He knew Bates was hurt, somehow.

Swiftly, he thrust Bates back against the seat, holding him there with his left hand. His right found the flashlight hooked onto his belt. Thumbing the switch, he turned the beam on Bates, and a startled curse pushed out through his clamped lips.

Dick Bates was dead!

There was a round bullet hole in the uniform coat almost directly over Dick Bates' heart. Blood made a dark, wet stain about the hole. The fabric seemed scorched, as though the gun had been held close to Bates when it was fired. There was also a bullet rip in Bates' left sleeve, up near the armpit. The fabric about that hole was also bloody.

Joe Hatchell's mind made one complete, dizzy revolution.

Dick Bates couldn't have been shot! He couldn't be—

Joe Hatchell swung the flashlight, punching its beam through the raised glass of the right-hand door, toward the rear door of Charlie's Place.

His mouth opened to yell for Charlie. Then he saw that his light wasn't spotting the rear door of Charlie's little eating joint. The beam washed over ancient, crumbling brick walls, a large window boarded up with darkly weathered planks. The alley behind Charlie's Place didn't have anything like that in it!

Shocked and bewildered, he managed to reach the switch and turn

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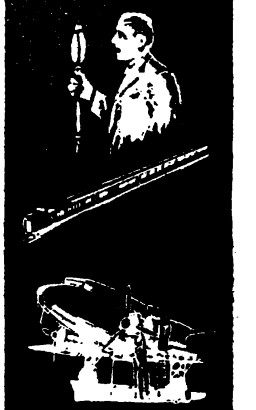

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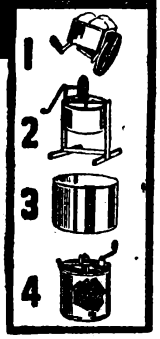

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on the prowl-car headlights.

Straight ahead, the lights showed a narrow, unpaved alley, slotlike between old brick walls. Charlie's alley was paved. Far ahead, on the street into which the alley led, he saw part of a rusty iron sign. What he could see of the sign read:

GREAT EASTERN FORWA . . .

His meeting teeth made an audible click in the prowl car. There were great beads of sweat on his face. He was shivering, though he didn't know it.

The Great Eastern Forwarding Co. was deep in the warehouse section. The prowl car, then, wasn't in the alley behind Charlie's Place. It was in an alley in the warehouse section. The car had been moved! Dick Bates had been shot and was dead! But—how?

The prowl-car radio sounded with a sudden sharpness that made him jump. He heard the voice of the police announcer.

"Calling all cars! Be on the lookout for Officers Joseph Hatchell and Richard Bates, assigned to Patrol Car 46. They are wanted for the robbery of the Help Britain Club at 10:30 p. m. and for shooting the officer on guard there. One of these men is believed to have been shot by the guard, but it is not known how badly he was wounded. Signal 31! Signal—"

Joe Hatchell's stubby-fingered hand clamped about the barrel of the flashlight until his knuckles hurt. His face was stiff and white and bathed with sweat.

Dick Bates' body slid from his grasp and folded over, wedging itself between the dash and the seat edge. Joe didn't notice. His mind was filled with churning thoughts.

Someone had made a terrible mis-

take. It was impossible. He and Dick Bates couldn't have robbed—killed. Just a few minutes ago, they were in the alley behind Charlie's Place, drinking coffee, then—

His chunky body started shaking uncontrollably. His teeth chattered.

Mistakes like that weren't made over the police radio, and Dick Bates had been shot. There was a bullet in his chest. The prowl car wasn't in the alley behind Charlie's.

Joe Hatchell groaned. Frantically, he looked about him, as though seeking answers to the questions churning in his mind; as though expecting to find those answers in the prowl car, in the light-washed alley.

The white square of something on the car seat where Dick Bates had been sitting caught his eyes. He stared at the vague white rectangle before turning the light on it. It was a white canvas money bag. There were black characters printed on its side:

HELP BRITAIN!

The bag was empty!

Joe Hatchell sat for a long moment, staring at the empty bag. Small, incoherent sounds came from his jerking lips.

Someone at the Help Britain Club had seen their uniforms. They must have seen the number of Car 46.

Almost sobbing, Joe Hatchell fumbled his service gun from its holster. He snapped the cylinder out, and all but dropped the heavy weapon as the flashlight beam showed a dented primer cap in the butt of one of the bright brass cartridges in the cylinder. He could even smell the burned cordite from the gun barrel.

He swallowed noisily, painfully.

That period of apparent sleep—had he and Dick Bates gone mad somehow?

The prowl-car radio sounded again. He heard the police announcer's voice.

"Attention, Car 27! Attention, Car 27! Car 46 is believed to be somewhere in the warehouse section. Car 27. Attention! Signal 31. Signal 31!"

Joe Hatchell's chunky body snapped taut.

Signal 31 meant proceed with utmost caution and shoot to kill at the slightest provocation! It meant that the men wanted were extremely dangerous, armed, and would resist arrest violently. Cop-killers!

Even now, Car 27 would be racing toward the warehouse section. McHan and Dargan were in Car 27. He knew them. Both were hard, tough cops. McHan and Dargan would get him, dead or alive. They would take his gun with its exploded cartridge. They would find Dick Bates, shot to death, with the dead cop's slug in his body. They would find the empty canvas money bag from the Help Britain Club. They would find—

"No!"

Joe Hatchell said that aloud. His chunky body stopped shaking. Moving swiftly, he snapped his flashlight back on his belt, holstered his gun. His left hand found the latch handle of the prowl-car door. As he opened the door and stepped to the packed dirt of the alley, he said almost inaudibly:

"We didn't do it, Dick! I'll prove it—somehow!"

Leaving the door open, he ran back along the alley, his legs blurring as he covered ground swiftly. He was heading back toward Char-

lie's Place. Charlie's Place was the last thing he remembered before—something happened. Charlie might know something. Charlie *had* to know something!

He reached the street, crossed it and plunged into the alley beyond. As the black slot of the alley swallowed him, he saw the flicker of headlights two blocks down the street. They were coming toward him fast. There was a red spotlight above the headlights. Car 27! McHan and Dargan!

Running as fast as he could, he pounded through the dark alley. The headlights of Car 27 whipped past the alley mouth as he reached the street beyond. McHan and Dargan weren't using their siren. Signal 31!

Gulping cold night air, Joe Hatchell ran through alleys, cut through vacant lots, taking the shortest route to get to the alley behind Charlie's Place. His leg muscles were jerking and he was breathing heavily as he reached the alley, ran along it to the rear door of Charlie's little lunchroom.

There was no one in the tiny, steamy kitchen; but through the smeared-glass panel of the swinging door at the other end of the room, he could see into the small, narrow lunchroom. Gus, Charlie's cook, was behind the lunch counter. A man, whom he had never seen before, was sitting at the counter. Charlie wasn't in sight.

Even as Joe Hatchell looked, the man at the counter drained his coffee cup, tossed a coin on the counter and slid from the stool. Gus rang up the sale on the battered cash register, then waddled back toward the kitchen door as the man left the lunchroom.

"Hey! What you want?" Gus' little black eyes went wide in his big, blue-jowled face as he saw Joe Hatchell. "Oh, the police fella who is liking my coffee every night. Yes. You are wanting more coffee? I get it for you."

Grinning, Gus moved ponderously.

"No! No coffee, Gus." Joe Hatchell was shivering, despite the warmth of the little kitchen. "I want Charlie, quick."

"Charlie is not here." Gus waved puffy hands. "Is home, maybe. Is telling me to look out. Is feeling bad, maybe. I don't know. You are wanting the coffee, now?"

"No! Quick, Gus; I've got to find Charlie right away!"

"Charlie is done something for the police fella to catch him?" Gus' puffy hands laced over his big stomach and he stopped grinning. "I don't know where Charlie is."

"No! Gus, Charlie's got to help me. I'm not after him to arrest him. I've got to find him quick. I—"

"So. I am knowing." Gus grinned again. "Charlie is living in Ne-ne-pol-i-ton something. Two-three-six blocks from here, maybe."

"Neapolitan Hotel? That it?" Joe Hatchell's voice was shrill.

"That's it. Room 301," Gus grinned broadly. "If you are finding Charlie there, please to asking him if I am to lock things up sometime before—"

But Joe Hatchell was gone.

Spinning, the prowl-car cop ran out through the rear door and sprinted along the pavement of the alley. The Neapolitan, he knew, was a three-story hotel which just escaped being classed as a flop-joint. It was four blocks from Charlie's Place.

He headed toward the hotel, moving as fast as his legs could carry him. As he ran, he watched for beat cops and prowl cars. He saw

neither. The streets were deserted. The time, he decided, must be somewhere around midnight. He wasn't sure.

The Neapolitan had no night desk clerk and no elevator. Joe trotted up the uncarpeted stairs, breathing heavily, all but deafened by the pound of blood in his ears. There was a gleam of hope in his eyes.

Charlie would know what had happened, some of it. Charlie would help get things straight.

Room 301.

He rapped on the scarred panels and called Charlie's name. There was no answer. He rapped again, waited; but no answer came. He tried the doorknob. It twisted and the door swung open. Hesitating only a moment, he stepped into the room—and saw Charlie.

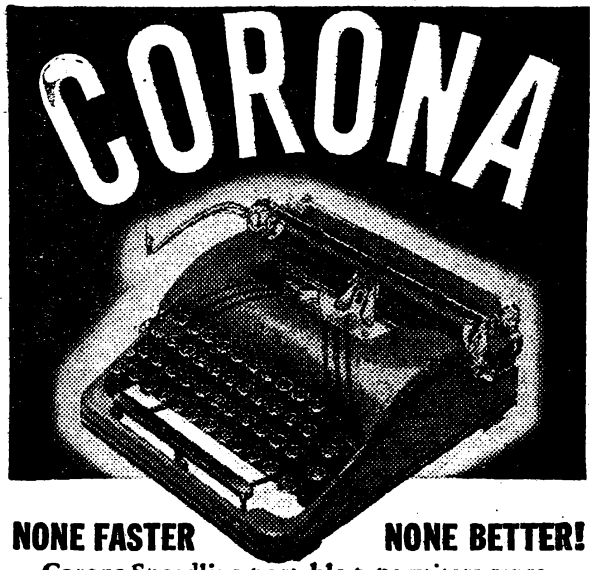
Light from the street lamp sifted in through the dirty panes of the single window and made a soft glow in the room. The glow wasn't soft enough to cloak the stark grimness of the place.

Charlie was in the room's single straight chair, over near the window. A chipped iron bed with dingy covers was the only other furniture. Charlie was slumped down in the chair, held up only by his head hanging over the back of the chair. The chair was sitting in the center of an irregular black spot on the uncarpeted floor. The stain, Joe Hatchell knew, was blood. Charlie's fat throat had been cut.

Charlie was dead!

Joe Hatchell stood just inside the closed door for a full minute, staring, hardly comprehending what he saw. His mind refused to function. He could think of nothing but that Dick Bates was dead, shot, and now the only man who could clear Dick and himself of robbery and murder, was dead, his throat slashed.

Absently, Joe thrust both hands into the side pockets of his uniform



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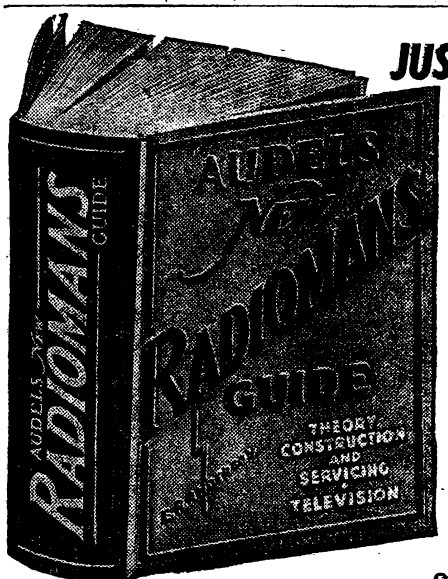

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coat. His right hand touched something in the pocket, and he fingered the thing for moments before he realized that it did not belong there. He never smoked and never kept things in his side coat pockets.

Dazedly, he took the thing out and saw that it was a paper book of matches. He never carried matches. He stared at the book, frowning, trying to grasp its meaning.

If *he* hadn't placed the match book in his pocket—

A sharp grunt escaped him; his mind started functioning again. Quickly, he switched on the flashlight and examined the match book closely.

The advertisement on its back proclaimed the delights of a certain brand of cigars. Only two of the matches had been torn out, leaving an orderly slab of pale-green match heads.

Then he saw the penciled characters on the inside cover of the match book.

5E ALMEDA.

Almeda!

He frowned. The name was familiar. There was an Almeda apartment building over on Eighth Avenue. The notation meant Apartment 5E, Almeda Apartments.

Joe Hatchell's lips tightened. Some of the shock and bewilderment left his eyes, to be replaced by the growing flame of anger. He stared at the match book for another full minute. His frown went away and he grunted softly. The match book answered some of the questions churning in his mind.

Thrusting the match book into his uniform pocket, he left Charlie's room. His heels thudded loudly on the uncarpeted stairs as he hurried out of the Neapolitan Hotel.

Reaching the street, he hurried along the sidewalk, keeping a sharp watch for police. Signal 31. If he tried to get away after either harness

cops or prowl cars spotted him, it would be a case of shoot first and ask questions later.

Headlights flashed in the street behind him after he had traveled about a block, and he ducked into a doorway. He watched the lights come toward him. There was no spotlight, and as the car came closer, he saw that it was a taxi. He left the doorway and hailed the cab.

"Almeda Apartments, over on Eighth," he told the driver with an official gruffness as he dropped to the cushions. "Police business. Make it snappy."

"I was heading for the barn, captain, but—"

The driver lifted broad shoulders in a resigned shrug and fed gas with a heavy foot.

They rode a block in silence.

"The radio just said two prowl-car cops went haywire tonight," the driver said over his shoulder. "Car 46. Guys named Hatchell and Bates. Stuck up the Help Britain Club and shot a cop on guard there. But the cop plugged one of them. Radio announcer said Car 46 was found with one of the guys dead in it, the other one gone with the dough. Fifteen grand. The club had pulled a stunt and had that much on tap when these guys came busting in in uniform. They wore masks, but the uniforms were a dumb give-away. Somebody spotted the prowl-car number outside. Now if I was a cop and wanted to pull me a job like that, I'd park the uniform and— Hey"—the driver looked over his shoulder, at the risk of running the cab up on the sidewalk—"you ain't one of them guys?"

"Would I be here, if I was?" Joe Hatchell managed a forced laugh.

"Well"—the driver turned his at-

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tention back to driving—"I guess maybe you wouldn't, but it would be smart, if you *were.*" He didn't say anything else until the cab stopped before the Almeda Apartments. "This is it, captain. The meter says fifty cents, but—"

Joe Hatchell tossed him a coin and left the cab hurriedly.

The Almeda was a tall brick building on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Mills Parkway. Joe Hatchell scowled at the Negro elevator boy.

"Apartment 5E." There was an official growl in his voice.

Silently, the boy let him out on the fifth floor. 5E was near the elevator shaft.

Joe Hatchell raised a hand to rap on the varnished door panel, then leaned forward quickly and pressed his ear against the door. Through the door, he heard the droning voice of the police announcer:

"Calling Car 27. Car 27! Go to Neapolitan Hotel on Sixth and Dalton. Sixth and Dalton. Neapolitan Hotel.

"Body discovered in Room 301. Wait there for homicide. Wait there for—"

"They sure found him quick, didn't they, Manton?" a voice in the room cut in. "But Perry must have got away all right. He ought to be here, now, the forgetful fool. I bet he forgot the address of this place. That sure was a smart idea tonight, Manton—fifteen thousand dollars, and the cops take the heat."

"I'm full of smart ideas, Vance." A second man said harshly. "We'll split the money when Perry gets here. I get seven thousand five hundred. You and Perry get the rest."

"But Perry and I took all the chances, Manton." There was a hint of anger in Vance's voice. "We pulled the heist and—"

Joe Hatchell straightened, his eyes blazing. Spots of color flamed in his cheeks. He had heard enough. He had answers to most of the questions in his mind. His right hand reached for the service gun holstered at his belt. His left caught the knob of the apartment door.

"Hold it just like that, copper!" a hoarse voice whispered behind him. A gun muzzle gouged into the small of his back. "The cops'll give me a medal for burning you, now." The man raised his voice. "Manton! Vance! It's Perry!"

The apartment door opened, and Joe Hatchell saw a slightly built, thin-faced man in a gray suit. Beyond him was a husky, brown-suited, brown-eyed man as large as Dick Bates. He was sitting in a chair before a small radio.

"Look what I got, Manton." Perry's gun prodded Joe Hatchell into the apartment. Perry closed the door. "It's the cop from Car 46, the one everybody thinks lammed with the dough."

The thin man lifted Joe Hatchell's service gun from its holster, then stepped back out of reach. The big man at the radio got to his feet. His left arm was rigid at his side.

Perry walked past Joe Hatchell and leaned against the wall some distance from the closed door. He held an automatic in his hand, twirling the weapon around his forefinger by the trigger guard. Perry was almost as large as Dick Bates. He wore a blue suit. His eyes were blue and cold.

"Get this straight, Perry, you and Vance." The thin man's eyes seemed to become much brighter. His slight, gray-clad body crouched a little. His thin face was pale and expressionless. He held Joe Hatchell's serv-

ice gun in his bony right hand, the muzzle of the weapon centered on the cop's chunky body. "This cop had to know something to come here! He had to get that information from one of us. Charlie didn't know anything about this place. Talk fast, one of you."

"Now, wait, Manton." Over by the radio, Vance waved a broad right hand. His left stayed rigid at his side. He licked at thick lips. "You got Perry and me wrong. We pulled the stick-up after you fixed it with Charlie to dope the coffee. We took chances there, and I got a slug crease." Vance pointed to his left arm. "It could have been the head, or the chest, like Perry gave it to the other prowl-car cop. After taking chances like that, neither of us would talk. It means the chair if we're caught. This cop—"

"I remember now, Manton." Perry kept swinging the automatic around his forefinger by the trigger guard. "After you told us to come here with the stuff, I figured I'd forget the address if Vance and I got separated; so I wrote the address on the inside of a match book. I couldn't find it after I went back to take care of Charlie and had a job remembering the address. That's why I took so long to get here, but it's all to the good. If I hadn't been late, I wouldn't have come up on this cop in the hall. He got the match book, somehow. Maybe I left it in his uniform when —"

"You have the book?" Manton moved one step closer to Joe Hatchell. The service gun was steady in his right fist.

"Yes." Joe Hatchell's mind was racing. Manton, Perry and Vance *couldn't* let him live, now. "You got Charlie to dope Dick Bates' and my coffee tonight. You'd known that we stopped at Charlie's every night at ten o'clock. After we passed

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out, Perry and Vance, who were waiting, took our uniforms and wore them to hold up the Help Britain Club. They used the prowl car and shot the officer at the club with my gun. The idea was to pass the blame to the police, and the resulting confusion would put all of you in the clear.

"After the holdup, they put the uniforms back on us, drove the prowl car down to the warehouse district, then shot Dick Bates and killed him. The money sack was planted in the prowl car. Vance wore Dick Bates' uniform. That's why Dick's left sleeve was bullet-ripped. Perry wore my uniform, forgot, and left the match book in my pocket. Charlie was killed, I expect, to keep him from talking and to keep him from sharing in the money. Charlie had lost his nerve and had gone to the Neapolitan, where Perry found him and cut his throat. I—"

"I want the match book," Manton said flatly. "After that, you're going to jump off the Almeda roof. The police'll think you realized you couldn't get away with what you did tonight; so you hid the money where nobody can find it and stepped off the roof." Manton moved a little closer. "Give me that match book."

"You can't get away with it! I—All right." Joe Hatchell's lips pinched tighter. He took the match book from his pocket, and his chunky body stiffened.

Vance, he saw, was still standing near the radio, his broad face twisted with pain. He was pressing gently with his right hand against his wounded left arm. Perry still leaned against the wall, swinging the automatic around on his forefinger by the trigger guard. Manton, almost within Joe Hatchell's reach, moved closer, his left hand reaching for the match book, the service gun in his right.

Quickly, Joe Hatchell opened the book, tore a match loose, struck it and touched the spurting flame to the pale-green heads of the other matches. Instantly, the slab of matches burst into hissing flame. He flung the burning mass straight at Manton's thin, pale face and plunged after it.

"Hey!" Perry yelled and pushed away from the wall, trying to fumble the spinning automatic into his hand for a shot. Vance just stood near the radio and stared.

Manton's hands went up instinctively to protect his face against the flaming match book. The service gun in his right hand blasted and plaster rained from the ceiling. The gun roar was deafening in the small living room.

The flaming match book hit Manton's arms and fell to the floor. Almost before it hit, Joe Hatchell's left hand trapped Manton's right wrist and his stubby fingers clamped down tightly. Manton screamed and clawed at his face with his free left hand.

Perry's gun blasted and a slug clipped Joe's left side, scorching a furrow just below his ribs. Grunting with pain, he swung Manton's struggling figure around between him and Perry, ripping the service gun from Manton's bony fingers.

Perry fired again, wildly! Manton jerked, yelping shrilly; his thin body sagged in Joe Hatchell's grasp. Beyond Manton, Joe Hatchell could see Perry. The gunman was aiming for another shot.

Frantically, Joe Hatchell juggled the service gun into his hand and fired. Perry's gun blasted, but the killer missed as he instinctively ducked Joe Hatchell's slug.

Joe released his grip on Manton's wrist, and the thin man slid to the floor. At the same moment, the cop got Perry over his gun sights. He squeezed the trigger.

Perry jerked, fired a bullet into

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the floor almost at his own feet, then stepped away from the wall with a curiously stiff movement. He made two steps, then dropped abruptly. There was a hole in his forehead just above the bridge of his nose.

Joe Hatchell swung his gun toward Vance. The big man near the radio was trying to take a gun from the right-hand pocket of his brown coat. The gun was caught in the pocket and Vance couldn't free it with one hand. His left arm was still rigid at his side.

"Hold it, Vance!" Joe Hatchell said that sharply. "You can't make it. Take your hand out—empty. Manton and Perry are dead. Charlie's dead. I—"

The radio near Vance sounded sharply. Joe Hatchell heard the police announcer's voice:

"Calling all cars! Calling all cars! Be on the lookout for Joseph Hatchell. Joseph Hatchell, formerly assigned to Car 46. When last seen, he was wearing a radio patrolman's uniform. He is five feet ten and one half inches, one hundred and ninety-six pounds, has blue eyes and brown hair, cropped close. He is wanted for—"

Joe Hatchell grinned, despite the flaming bullet crease across his side. The radio announcer's voice went on:

"Car 27 and Car 36! Car 27 and Car 36! Go to the Almeda apartment building at Eighth and Mills. Eighth and Mills. Someone there reports gunfire."

Joe Hatchell's grin broadened. He chuckled deep in his throat as his mind formed another broadcast, one that would be on the air a few minutes after Car 27 and Car 36 reached the Almeda. That broadcast would be:

"Calling all cars! Calling all cars! Cancel the pick-up order on Officer Joseph Hatchell!"

THE END.

WITH THE WHISPERER

Continued from page 6

Their money pays for it, so they should have something to say about it. Any time you have any idea; any suggestions, no matter how small you think they might be, send them in. Sometimes a thing which doesn't seem much to you may prove very important to us.

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Our next issue of The Whisperer carries another great novel with the thrilling adventures of Wildcat Gor-

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